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Biafran mediations:  
Artistic legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war

Matthew Justin Lecznar

Submitted for the examination of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
University of Sussex  
June 2019

**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted, in whole or in part, to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: .....

**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

**MATTHEW JUSTIN LECZNAR**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**BIAFRAN MEDIATIONS:  
ARTISTIC LEGACIES OF THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR**

**VOLUME I**

**SUMMARY**

This thesis explores artistic legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Since the end of the internecine conflict, a diverse range of artists working in and across a variety of forms have creatively mediated the struggle and its aftermath. Despite this cultural outpouring, the history of Biafra remains highly contested in Nigeria, and it is not extensively commemorated or taught in the country. The scholarship around the conflict's legacies has also been restrictive, focusing predominantly on literary responses and enforcing the idea that Biafra represents a traumatic void in Nigeria's cultural history. This thesis counters these tendencies by tracing the creative experiments and subversive politics that have defined Biafra's multimedia artistic heritage. I argue that the war's artistic mediation has reimaged it as a space where such complex issues can be articulated and reappraised.

In the introduction, I lay out the project's historical and theoretical parameters, framing key debates around Biafra's legacies and exploring the mediations of artists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ben Enwonwu. The first chapter compares three creative responses to the conflict – a photographic narrative by Peter Obe, a play by Catherine Acholonu and a novel by Ken Saro-Wiwa – arguing that these diverse narratives 'formfool' Biafra, breaking the political and aesthetic frames that have delimited the war's reception. In the second chapter, I consider the mixed media practices of members of the Nsukka group, drawing connections between their experiences of exile and their multimedia navigations of the conflict. The third chapter addresses the queer dynamic that runs through the writings of Chinelo Okparanta and Ogali A. Ogali and the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode, which I argue offer subversive visions of the war's significance. The conclusion explores the speculative potential of Biafra, affirming that processes of obscure speculation and mythic mediation have been central in promulgating its artistic legacies.

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## 1) Introduction: Mediating Biafra's "patchy fabric"

*The Biafra Story* is not a history in full detail of the present war; there is still too much that is not known, too many things that cannot yet be revealed, for any attempt to write the story of the war to be other than a patchy fabric. (Forsyth 7)

### DYEING

Weave for me  
 beautiful patterns  
 and skeins of silver thread  
 and gossamer.  
 I shall sit a while longer  
 at your loom  
 while you thread together  
 the scissored shreds  
 of this fabric.  
 [...]
   
 Had I any choice  
 I would dip them in scarlet,  
 to mark the end of waiting. (Tobrise 215)

In ways both striking and obscure, these epigraphs mediate the legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–70). The conflict, which was fought between the Nigerian state and the secessionist Eastern Region under the banner of the Republic of Biafra, is also commonly known as the Nigerian Civil War.<sup>1</sup> The British journalist Frederick Forsyth's book *The Biafra Story* was published at the height of the conflict in 1969. That the war would not come to an end until January 1970 explains Forsyth's assertion that his and other contemporary accounts of the crisis can only represent partial histories or, as he evocatively puts it, a "patchy fabric" (7). Such a textile configuration of the war's representation is also offered by the Nigerian writer Mabel Tobrise in her poem "Dyeing". Published in 1999, several decades after the end of the conflict, the verse does not explicitly invoke the memory or history of the internecine struggle. However, through Tobrise's invocation of "skeins of silver" woven from "scissored shreds" (Tobrise 215) – and through the deathly resonance evoked by the title of the poem,

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<sup>1</sup> As this thesis focuses on the artistic aftermath of Biafra's secession, the ensuing conflict between Biafra and Nigeria and Biafra's eventual surrender, I have chosen to refer to the event as the Nigeria-Biafra war, the Biafran war, the Biafran conflict, or simply as Biafra.

which is a homophone of ‘dying’ – it plays on the vital tension between modes of metaphorical as well as material interweaving, unravelling and haunting that, this thesis contends, have been crucial to the fashioning of the war’s creative legacies.

The conflict’s causes and its implications for post-war Nigeria have been explored in depth by historians and politicians of various stripes since 1970. Notable nonfictional publications include historical analyses by Ruth First (1970), Suzanne Cronjé (1972), John de St. Jorre (1972), Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe (2006) and Michael Gould (2012), and memoirs by prominent Nigerians including Olusegun Obasanjo (1980) and Alexander Madiebo (1980), who were prominent generals in the Nigerian and Biafran armies respectively, and Philip Effiong (2007), a leading figure in the Biafran administration who oversaw the state’s surrender. Much more significant in terms of the focus of this thesis, however, is the remarkable outpouring of creative responses to the war that commenced during the conflict and which has continued to be a major cultural force in Nigeria and beyond over the last five decades.

From the late 1960s onwards, a profusion of Nigeria’s most famous artists produced works – and often multiple ones – dealing with the Nigeria-Biafra war. Important early responses to the conflict include the collection of portrait and mythological paintings produced by Ben Enwonwu, one of Nigeria’s most famous modernists, and the late verse of Christopher Okigbo, a fabled poet who died fighting for the Biafran cause.<sup>2</sup> While Enwonwu and Okigbo are undoubtedly titanic figures in the history Biafra’s artistic reception, it was in the subsequent decades following the war that the creative potency of Biafra’s impact became amplified and clarified. During the 1970s, an array of artists who had lived through the conflict composed fictional, poetical, dramatic works in the wake of their experiences. These include creative pieces by already established figures such as the writers Chinua Achebe

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<sup>2</sup> Enwonwu’s painterly responses to Biafra include *Three Biafran Children* (1966) and *Crucified Gods Galore* (1967–8), while Okigbo’s posthumous poetry collection *Labyrinths* (1971) includes one of his most profound poetic sequences, “Path of Thunder”, which he completed before his death in Biafra.

(1971; 1972), Elechi Amadi (1973), Flora Nwapa (1975), Zulu Sofola (1974) and Wole Soyinka (1972; 1974), which expose the deep psychological and social implications of the struggle, and visual pieces by a group of emerging artists comprising the likes of Obiora Udechukwu, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Chike Aniakor, who utilised indigenous as well as European artistic techniques to produce hybrid responses to their experiences during the war.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, as vivid memories of the conflict started to recede and reform, artists engaged in more politically pointed and formally experimental mediations of Biafra. Although female writers such as Nwapa and Sofola had foregrounded the experiences of women during the war in the early 1970s, the dire gender imbalance that had prevailed in the Nigerian art scene during the preceding decades was not forcefully addressed until the release of Emecheta's more overtly feminist retelling of the Biafra story in her novel *Destination Biafra* (1982). This development combined with a host of other responses to the conflict by female artists produced during the 1980s and 1990s – from the paintings of Marcia Kure, Ada Udechukwu and Chinwe Uwatse to the writings of Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1985), Rose Njoku (1986) and Pauline Onwubiko (1988) – to establish a fully-fledged feminist tradition within the Nigerian and Biafran arts.<sup>4</sup>

Other important interventions during this period came from artists such as the poet Odia Ofeimun (1980), the satirist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa (1985), the novelist and poet Ben Okri (1986; 1988; 1996), the poet and artist Olu Oguibe (1994, see Figure 17) and the photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1987; 1989, see Figures 19 and 20), all of whom offer

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<sup>3</sup> Of these writers, Achebe and Soyinka in particular have responded to the war using a variety of literary genres. Achebe, who is widely lauded as the father of modern African literature, wrote a book of short stories titled *Girls at War* (1972) and a poetry collection called *Beware, Soul Brother* (1971), while Soyinka – who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986 – has responded to the war in works such as the play *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), the memoir *The Man Died* (1971) and the novel *Season of Anomy* (1972). As for the visual artists' compositions, these include O. Udechukwu's woodcut *The Exiles (Facing the Unknown)* (1973, see Figure 8), Onobrakpeya's etching *Obioma and Reconstruction* (1973) and Aniakor's ink painting *Exodus I, (The Refugees)* (1977), all of which explore forms of displacement engendered by the conflict.

<sup>4</sup> Biafra-related artworks by these female artists include Kure's painting *The Victors and the Vanquished* (ca. 1990), A. Udechukwu's *In Between* (1994, see Figure 12) and Uwatse's *Nowhere to Go* (ca. 1990).

formally experimental and provocative visions of the conflict's significance in their arts. Biafra's creative significance was reinvigorated in the 2000s, when novels dealing with different dimensions of the war's cultural legacies helped to launch the careers of such internationally acclaimed authors as Chris Abani (2004; 2007), Sefi Atta (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006) and Helon Habila (2008). Finally, the 2010s have seen the conflict undergo further reimaginings, with works by artists including the fiction writers Chinelo Okparanta (2015), Lesely Nneka Arimah (2017) and Nnamdi Ehirim (2019), the mixed media artists Ndidi Dike and Nnenna Okore, and the playwright Inua Ellams all offering fresh perspectives on Biafra.<sup>5</sup>

While the aim of this thesis is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the many artists and artworks engaging in Biafra's legacies, my analysis does propose a number of original and comparative approaches to these arts that can be used to bring them into necessary dialogue. Indeed, given the large and diverse body of art works that have creatively reimagined the Nigeria-Biafra war, it is my contention that Forsyth's 1969 conceptualisation of the Biafran story as a patchy fabric, which Tobrise's poem "Dyeing" subtly recasts, still holds true some five decades later. On the one hand, creative representations of the conflict are capable of commanding global audiences. A case in point is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).<sup>6</sup> Since its release, the book has been translated into thirty-seven languages (*Chimamanda.com*, "Half of a Yellow Sun" para. 5) and been adapted into a record-breaking film.<sup>7</sup> The novel has also helped to cement Adichie's

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<sup>5</sup> As I explore later in the thesis, the Biafran writings of Okparanta and Arimah – in the novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and the short story collection *What it Means When a Man Falls From the Sky* (2017) respectively – are striking for the way they refract the war through queer and speculative imaginative lenses. In the visual arts, Dike and Okore have produced startling and abstract installations that draw on Biafran discourses and imagery, from Dike's mixed media work *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown* (2010, see Figure 18) and Okore's newspaper and acrylic sculpture *No Condition is Permanent* (2013). By contrast, Ellams' dramatic retelling of the Biafran war, titled *Three Sisters*, is an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's classic play *The Three Sisters* (first performed in 1901) and will première at the National Theatre in London in December 2019 ("Three Sisters.").

<sup>6</sup> I henceforth refer to Adichie's novel – which won the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction – as *Yellow Sun* in my main analysis, and as *HYS* when quoting from the text.

<sup>7</sup> The film version set a new first weekend box-office record in Nigeria (*Vanguard*, "Half of a Yellow Sun sets" para. 1).

position as one of the most fêted writers to emerge in the twenty-first century. Indeed, in 2015, she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of the year (Jones, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” para. 1). On the other hand, while *Yellow Sun* illustrates the Biafran war’s enduring cultural salience, the conflict remains a sensitive and deeply divisive subject for many Nigerians.

To this day, the history of the war is not extensively taught nor widely commemorated in the country, while certain sections of the population still dream of living in an independent Biafran state. Speaking to the first point, Raisa Simola notes that “the rather sparse official commemoration of the Civil War has been left mainly to the military, which uses the opportunity to assure itself of its role as guarantor of national unity” (“Time and Identity” 98). In contrast to this, Godwin Onuoha writes about the enduring pro-Biafran sentiments in Nigeria, particularly in relation to the exploits of neo-Biafran groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Onuoha asserts that “MASSOB has adopted counterimages and symbols and a particular version of Igbo history as vehicles for establishing its claim to self-determination” (“The presence of the past” 2192). These analyses demonstrate the enduring salience and thorniness of the Biafran question in Nigeria, which retains both conservative and revolutionary significances.

This thesis is concerned with tracing the creative contours of this textured terrain. Focusing on artistic legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war, and in particular on a range of textual and visual works produced by Nigerian artists in the decades following the end of the conflict, I argue that the resulting Biafran mediations have radically reframed the contested histories and dissonant memories of the struggle. I have chosen ‘mediation’ as the organising principle of the thesis because it connotes processes and technologies of representation, negotiation and adaptation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) offers several definitions of the term that support such a dynamic usage. While ‘mediation’ is principally defined as “[a]gency or action as a mediator” (OED), the term is also portrayed as “a medium of

transmission; instrumentality” (*OED*), and as “[t]he interposition of stages or processes between stimulus and result, or intention and realization” (*OED*). As I demonstrate in this introduction and throughout the thesis, the Nigeria-Biafra war has been highly mediated since its inception. The conflict’s development and international reception were framed by a number of political, identitarian and humanitarian concerns as well as by media technologies, and artists have been driven to interrogate these overlapping modes of mediation ever since.

As already noted, a surge of international interest in Biafra coincided with the publication of Adichie’s *Yellow Sun*. This point is underscored and developed in a recent book, *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War* (2017), co-authored by the anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird and the historian Fraser M. Ottanelli. Although principally concerned with reconstructing events surrounding the Asaba massacre of October 1967 – one of the deadliest episodes of the war – Bird and Ottanelli dedicate a section of the book to the question of Biafra’s post-war significance for the country as a whole. They note that the “memory of Biafra refuses to die” (Bird and Ottanelli 180) despite it being “wiped from the official map of Nigeria” (180). Gesturing to the widespread suppression of public debate about the conflict following Biafra’s defeat, the authors go on to assert:

In recent years [...] there has been an upsurge of writing about the war, comprising what has been defined as a ‘memory boom’ around experiences of the war, and encompassing academic scholarship, memoirs, and fictional works, such as the influential [...] *Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Adichie. (Bird and Ottanelli 181)

Other examples of the ‘memory boom’ gestured to here include the 2009 special issue of the journal *African Development* edited by Ike Okonta and Kate Meagher and the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual International Igbo Conference, which was dedicated to “Legacies of Biafra”.<sup>8</sup> Bird and

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<sup>8</sup> The “Legacies of Biafra” conference was hosted at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in April 2017. It brought together artists, academics and members of the public to commemorate and interrogate the war and its aftermath, and it is noteworthy that one of the highlights of the conference was a video address given by Adichie.

Ottanelli do not offer a detailed elaboration of these other developments, however. Instead, they portray the publication of *Yellow Sun* as the seminal moment around which a broader constellation of Biafra-related reference points can be mapped. *Yellow Sun*'s construction as a supremely salient work within the field of Biafra studies is further underscored by the literary scholar Ernest N. Emenyonu, who argues that "[t]here is a sense in which it could be said that the great Nigerian war novel did not exist until [...] *Yellow Sun*" (7). Such critical exaltations have not only helped to establish the novel as a major work within the Nigerian literary field, but have also contributed to its consecration within the canons of African and World literatures more broadly. As a mark of *Yellow Sun*'s global status, it was recently included in a list of '100 Novels that Shaped Our World', which was curated by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ("Explore the List" para. 1).

I deliberately draw this distinction between the different bodies of writing that *Yellow Sun* and other literary responses to the Biafran war form part of – between the particular corpus of diverse works that engages with the history of the conflict and the broader canons of internationally esteemed publications that some of these narratives belong to – to underscore that not all textual mediations of the crisis by Nigerians are canonical within the global literary field. In this way, I follow the lead of the literary scholar Madhu Krishnan, who distinguishes between 'African literature' as "that body of work consecrated and canonised by the global literary markets" (*Contingent Canons* 5) on the one hand, and 'African literary production' as "the larger fullness and diversity of literary activity emanating from the continent and its diasporas" (5) on the other.

Yet it is also important to note that books about Biafra have proven marketable both within Nigeria and internationally since the late 1960s. The publisher and critic James Currey, who ran Heinemann Educational Books' pioneering African Writers Series from 1967 to 1984, recalls that "[t]he Biafran war dominated Nigerian work by new writers which was selected in Ibadan, Nairobi and London for the [...] Series during the mid-1970s and early



1980s” (43). He adds that these books “proved saleable in the general market both in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa” (Currey 43). While not all books on Biafra have gained international readerships, and this thesis is not principally concerned with tracing the complex material history of the war’s literary reception, it is nevertheless crucial to highlight the marketability and mobility of cultural responses to the conflict in subsequent decades.

Returning to the privileging of *Yellow Sun* within critical discourses, the sheer amount of scholarship published on the novel since its 2006 release is a testament to its establishment as an influential work within the corpus of published Nigeria-Biafra war narratives. Within this body of criticism, key critical focuses have included readings of the novel’s portrayal of violence and trauma (De Mey 2011; Norridge 2012; Novak 2008; Tembo 2012), Nigerian literary history (Hawley 2012; Hodges 2009; Lecznar 2017; Ugochukwu 2011), narrative authorship (Akpome 2013; Ngwira 2012; Ouma 2011), the postcolonial exotic (Krishnan 2011); gender politics (Bryce 2008; C. Njoku 2017), diasporic identity (Strehle 2011), state formation (Marx 2008; Morrison 2005), corporeality (Masterson 2009) and melancholia (Dodgson-Katiyo 2017). These interventions, and many more besides, have enriched understanding of this undoubtedly important novel while also illuminating its relationship with other Biafra texts. Particularly significant in this regard is the emphasis that has been placed by critics on the connections between Adichie and Achebe’s responses to Biafra (Anyadike 2008; Boehmer 2009; Hawley 2008; Ugochukwu 2011; Wenske 2016; Whittaker 2011). Although the Achebe-Adichie relationship is an important one in terms of Biafra’s legacies – and Adichie has been at pains to invite comparisons between herself and Achebe through her writings – such a critical preoccupation has meant that other forms of artistic

connections and genealogies have been overlooked.<sup>9</sup>

*Yellow Sun*'s predominance in scholarly spheres is also indicative of a broader trend in cultural responses to the Nigeria-Biafra war. In the decades since the conflict's end in January 1970, understanding of Biafra's broader legacies has been dominated by the fictional and autobiographical accounts of a small group of prominent creative figures that have tended to be read in isolation from the war's larger artistic heritage. Such studies have focused on the biographical and socio-political dimensions of writers' responses to the war, particularly in the works of Achebe (Ejiogu 2013; Jeyifo 2016; Obiechina 2002), Soyinka (Akingbe 2013; Amuta 1986; Whitehead 2008), Amadi (Finch 1975; McLuckie 2001; Sample 1991), Emecheta (Adams 2001; Bryce 1991; Hodges 2010; Machiko 2008; Uraizee 1997), Nwapa (Bryce 1991; Nnaemeka 1998; Sample 1991; Simola 1999) and Okigbo (Nwakanma 2010; Nwoga 1984; Richards 2005). While these accounts all offer significant insights into the war literatures produced by this group of writers, they have also helped establish a critical tradition around Biafra's artistic legacies that conceives of it primarily as a literary phenomenon. The principal limitation of this approach is that it privileges the perspectives of a small group of writers whose works circulate internationally, and therefore overlooks the other arts that have been created within and outside of Nigeria since the war.

Although it is not my desire to repudiate the authority of these texts or the scholarship that has grown around them, it is important to question the impact of this literature since the end of the war, and to place it in the context of broader discursive, political, and aesthetic developments. With this in mind, this thesis makes an intervention in

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<sup>9</sup> Adichie offers a comparison between her novel *Yellow Sun* and Achebe's war memoir *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) in a review for the *London Review of Books*. While Adichie describes Achebe's memoir as a profound lament for the failings of the Nigerian nation, she also notes the disappointing lack of personal remembrances contained within it: "I longed to hear more of what he had felt during those months of war – in other words, I longed for a more novelistic approach" ("Things Left Unsaid" para. 9). Adichie weighs her words carefully here, but this critique nevertheless makes a tacit argument about the superior value of *Yellow Sun* in comparison to *There Was a Country*. Indeed, implicit in Adichie's response is a bold statement of her artistic ambitions. For, while Achebe may be considered Africa's most famous literary export, it is Adichie's novelisation of Biafra – or so the writer intimates – that makes the more powerful intervention in the creative legacies of the conflict.

the scholarship of Biafra's artistic legacies by refusing to re-enforce the narrow preoccupation with the Biafran writings of Achebe, Adichie, Soyinka and select others that has been propagated in the discourse. Indeed, a key aim of this thesis is to lay the foundations for more comparative and innovative approaches to Biafra's aftermath; ones which are not limited to a small number of literary texts that have already garnered considerable critical attention. To commence this critical reframing, and after giving an overview of Biafra's cultural and critical impact, the remaining sections of the introduction interrogate aspects of Adichie's seminal novel and its reception in order to revitalise understanding of the text and to rejuvenate approaches to Biafra's multidimensional artistic legacies.

Developing these opening analyses, the thesis as a whole breaks new critical ground by highlighting and probing the vibrant intersections between writings on the conflict, primarily in the forms of prose and poetry, and other modes of visual and performance culture that have mediated Biafra, principally in paintings, photographs and plays. In this way, I reveal the rich entanglement of generative and transgressive threads that have been fabricated out of the war's history and remembrance. These creative mediations operate at personal, national and global levels, and are deeply implicated and imbricated in debates about Nigeria's future as well as its past and present.

My intention, then, is to reframe understanding of Biafra as a multifaceted creative sign and historical-mnemonic remnant; to comparatively interrogate artistic responses to the war as a way of rethinking its vital but patchy cultural residues. I do this by offering original aesthetic analyses of a range of Biafran mediations that traverse the boundaries of prose, poetry, painting, photography and the plastic arts, foregrounding how they creatively rework the imaginative and political terrain of the Nigeria-Biafra war. In pursuing these aims, I do not seek to offer an exhaustive survey or unitary theoretical interpretation of artistic responses to the conflict. Rather, I intend to propose a set of innovative and overlapping approaches to Biafra's creative legacies by studying the ways ideas of framing, exile, queerness

and the speculative might help to illuminate the cultural artefacts of a select group of artists that span the breadth of this rich corpus. This method will not only reinvigorate the critical landscape of Biafran arts scholarship – which, as I have already illustrated, has generally been restricted to a narrow preoccupation with a few canonical writers – but will also open up new, multidisciplinary pathways for future research into the field.

As a part of this process of critically revitalising Biafra’s artistic legacies, I have chosen not to focus on artworks by Adichie, Achebe or Soyinka in the main chapters of the thesis. This approach will, on the one hand, prevent my analysis from being overly determined by works that have garnered such extensive and wide-ranging critical interest. On the other, it will allow for other genealogies and trajectories to come to the fore, and for more imaginative comparisons between different artistic genres to be instantiated. However, as *Yellow Sun* has been particularly crucial to the development of this research and to many other recent explorations of the Biafran crisis, an engagement with Adichie’s novel in the thesis is, I believe, necessary so that it offers an incisive and expansive account of the war’s cultural impact over the last half-century. I therefore offer analyses of *Yellow Sun* in both the introduction and conclusion of the thesis, which interrogate its multidimensional narrative and its critical reception. By reframing Biafra’s artistic legacies as a diverse constellation of cultural artefacts, and by resituating *Yellow Sun* within its orbit, the thesis underscores the vibrancy of the war as an area of cultural studies, both within Nigeria and without.

### **1.1 Biafra’s shadows**

The Nigeria-Biafra war broke out on 6 July 1967, several weeks after the Eastern Region of Nigeria unilaterally seceded from the rest of the country as the Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967. These critical developments followed a period of growing social and political tensions after Nigeria gained independence from Britain in October 1960. During the prior period of colonisation, British rulers had instigated a divide and rule policy in the Colony and

Protectorate of Nigeria, which was constituted as a single territory in 1914. As the historian Raphael Chijioke Njoku argues, “the evolution of exclusionary politics under colonial rule engendered a conflictual pattern of ethnic structures and ethnonationalism in postcolonial Nigeria” (265). The identitarian divisions sown during the colonial period were further exacerbated in the run-up to Nigeria’s independence, when the country’s many ethno-linguistic groups jostled for power within the new dispensation. Yet it was the leaders from Nigeria’s largest ethnic populations – the Hausa-Fulani, who hail from the north of the country, and the Yoruba and Igbo groups, from the southwest and east respectively – who would dominate Nigeria’s tripartite regional political structure in the post-independence era, and who would ultimately oversee the country’s descent into war.

The deep fissures woven into the Nigerian polity by the colonial encounter took on a violent aspect in January 1966, when the elected government was overthrown in a military coup. This radical event came in the aftermath of political crises that erupted during the tense federal and regional election campaigns of 1964 and 1965, which were marked by widespread vote rigging, protests and state-sponsored violence. The subsequent 1966 coup resulted in the deaths of prominent political figures including the prime minister of Nigeria, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and the premier of the Northern Region, Ahmadu Bello. As a number of the coup plotters were Igbo, a perception grew across the country that the Igbo population was attempting to seize power. As a result, violent massacres began to be perpetrated against Igbo people and others from the Eastern Region of Nigeria, which led to the mass movement of these groups back to the east. The situation deteriorated further when Hausa military figures led a counter-coup in July 1966 and Yakubu Gowon became the new military head of state. After several failed attempts at resolving the crisis, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the governor of the Eastern Region – an area predominantly populated by Igbo-speaking people – proclaimed the state’s secession from

the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Following Biafra's breakaway, Gowon mobilised the Nigerian army, vowing to reunite the country.

The subsequent war, which lasted for thirty months, produced a disastrous famine in the Biafran enclave, and eventually ended with Biafra's surrender on 13 January 1970. Although no accurate records of fatalities were kept by either side during the war (St. Jorre 412), estimates of the number of military and civilian casualties range from 100,000 to three million people. For instance, while Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe confidently asserts that three million Igbo people were killed during the conflict (3), Eghosa E. Osaghe gives a much less definitive estimation of the overall death toll, suggesting that between one and three million people died in the war (69). An even more conservative appraisal is given by Michael Gould, who posits that the number of people displaced by the conflict was around 150,000 and the number of war casualties around 100,000 (203). These contrasting analyses demonstrate the continuing lack of agreement among scholars about the realities of the Biafran conflict, which has contributed to its status as a contested and shadowy period in Nigeria's history.

The war was also pivotal in the development of international perceptions of the country and of postcolonial Africa more broadly. As Lasse Heerten puts it in a study of the impact of the Biafran conflict on global humanitarianism, "[t]he war became the first postcolonial conflict to engender a global surge of humanitarian sentiment and activism" (2). This seismic shift was largely due to the media interest that the war garnered during 1968:

[W]hen famine hit the enclave, reporters [...] began to stream into Biafra. With British newspapers blazing the trail, newsstands across Western Europe and North America were soon plastered with pictures of Biafra's children, of emaciated figures with bloated bellies and vacant eyes. (Heerten 2)

Heerten's reading develops from Alex de Waal's work in *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (1997), which argues that the war is both "totemic" (73) and "taboo" (73) in the history of twentieth-century humanitarianism. de Waal asserts that Biafra is totemic because "it was an unsurpassed effort in terms of logistical achievement and sheer

physical courage” (73), while its taboo status is confirmed by “the ethical issues that it raises [and still] have [...] to be faced” (73). One of these ethical dilemmas is the question of whether the Biafra aid campaign was complicit in prolonging the conflict and worsening the famine by providing vital supplies to the Biafran army (de Waal 75–7). The conflict, then, was critical in the development of modern humanitarian discourses, and the third chapter of this thesis argues that the taboo dimension of Biafra’s legacies examined by de Waal has been transformed into a subversive and queer aesthetic modality by Nigerian artists.

Another tense debate that has continued to rage since the end of the war relates to accusations that the Nigerian army committed acts of genocide in Biafra. While successive Nigerian governments have denied that they pursued such a policy, a number of notable historians and writers nevertheless argue that the state is guilty of crimes against humanity. The historian Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, for instance, argues vociferously that the massacres committed against Igbo people in 1966 formed the first phase of a calculated genocide against the Igbo, and goes so far as to call the Nigerian government a “genocide state” (125). Achebe, by contrast, offers a more measured response to the genocide question in his war memoir and final published work, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012).<sup>10</sup> Achebe, who was a passionate supporter of the secessionist cause and served as an advisor and ambassador for the Biafran government, is upfront in the book about his lack of expertise regarding the accusations of genocide: “I am not a sociologist, a political scientist, a human rights lawyer, or a government official” (228). The writer also makes plain that “there is precious little relevant literature that helps answer these questions” (*There Was A Country* 228). Despite offering these caveats, Achebe goes on to quote numerous sources that bolster the view that Nigeria did commit genocide in Biafra, and he offers little in the way of counter-argument. Although Achebe rightly notes that “[t]here were real excesses to account

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<sup>10</sup> I henceforth refer to Achebe’s memoir as *There Was a Country*.

for” (232) in terms of the actions of the Nigerian army and other stakeholders, it is important to remember – as Heerten states – that there is a “relatively widespread consensus [that the Biafran war] did not constitute genocide” (13). Crucially, Heerten underscores the complexity of this debate: “As a civil war in which both sides were victims *and* perpetrators, the conflict was much more complicated than its designation as ‘genocide’ initially suggested” (289, italics in original).

A further accusation levelled against the Nigerian state by Achebe relates to the policy of ‘Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction’ that was instituted following Biafra’s defeat. Although the Nigerian government proclaimed that there were to be “no victors, no vanquished” (Asika 80) when the war came to a close, Achebe rejects the claim that the transition to peace and reconciliation was successful: “I have news for them: The Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria, one of the main reasons for the country’s continued backwardness, in my estimation” (235).<sup>11</sup> As Achebe’s memoir demonstrates, there has been sustained disagreement about the effectiveness of the post-war reconstruction effort. Indeed, what this dissensus importantly underscores is the continuing inability of the Nigerian state to resolve the divisions and contrasting attitudes towards the war across the country. Even to this day, the contestations laid bare by the Biafran conflict show no sign of abating. For instance, a series of recent protests in south-eastern Nigeria by neo-Biafran organisations such as MASSOB and the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) have laid bare the explosive fissures that continue to mark the conflict’s unresolved history.<sup>12</sup> And yet, a major contention of this thesis is that issues around the political legacies of the war are also deeply inflected with aesthetic concerns.

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<sup>11</sup> The phrase ‘no victors, no vanquished’ was coined by Ukpabi Asika, the Federal Government Administrator of the East Central State during the war.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about these protests, which allegedly resulted in dozens of deaths at the hands of state security forces, see the articles written by Nwabueze Okonkwo (2016) and Chinonso Alozie (2018) for the *Vanguard* news website.



In a study of the competing discourses that have surrounded the Biafran crisis in Nigeria, Onuoha argues that “[t]he Nigerian state adopts a hegemonic narrative, which shapes the official history and memories of the war to suit its own vision, interests, and politics” (“Shared Histories” 4). The official narrative advanced by the state, so Onuoha asserts, is that the conflict represented a “war of national unity” (“Shared Histories” 4); this attitude is reflected in the development of education syllabi and commemorative practices that emphasise a singular vision of the war’s unifying significance. However, as Onuoha further contends, “[o]fficial national narratives have failed to fit perfectly into actual historical events because they gloss over complex issues of justice, with continued marginalization, alienation, and distancing of many ethnic nationalities from the postwar project of national unity” (“Shared Histories” 12). The failure of the Nigerian state to forge a unified and unitary narrative out of Biafra’s contestatory legacies has meant that “multiple kinds of war memories and narratives are being produced in different locations” (Onuoha, “Shared Histories” 12). As Onuoha powerfully illustrates, attitudes towards the war in Nigeria are mediated by a complex array of aesthetic as well as political considerations.

The complex and bitterly contested terrain of Biafra’s legacies in Nigeria should not be underestimated. As Ifi Amadiume puts it in her study of the legacies of the war, “there is no escaping the burden of the memory of Biafra” (“The Politics of Memory” 40). However, the aim of this thesis is not to intervene in debates about who was ultimately to blame for the destructive conflict, even though this question continues to be an urgent one. Rather, my intention is to highlight some of the ways that artists have conveyed and given shape to the complex modes of irresolution that have mediated Biafra since the end of the struggle. Krishnan gives a useful sense of the way Nigerian writers have textually rendered this patchy fabric in an article titled “Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure in the Third Generation

Nigerian Novel” (2010).<sup>13</sup> In the conclusion to the article, which analyses Biafran war narratives by Adichie, Chris Abani and Helon Habila, Krishnan asserts that “[b]y refusing the narrative compulsion of closure and tidy endings, these narratives and their representation of individuals and conflicts highlight the importance of continued negotiation and interrogation necessary in the postcolonial condition” (“Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure” 194).<sup>14</sup> While I find Krishnan’s appraisal of the narrative irresolution woven through these novels persuasive, this thesis takes the particular dynamic she locates as its starting point rather than its end point. In the rest of this introduction and the subsequent chapters, I explore the implications of this lack of closure for Biafra’s artistic legacies. By doing so, I question how this conceptual instability has been borne out in the diverse and multimedia works produced by artists across the creative and political spectrum.

As a way of approaching these tense mediations, it is relevant to consider Adichie’s framing of her creative intervention in the history and memory of Biafra. In an essay exploring her motivations for writing about the conflict, Adichie gestures towards the complexity of the Biafra’s cultural legacies: “I was born seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, and yet the war is not mere history for me, it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra” (“African ‘Authenticity’” 49–50). Despite having a clear personal connection to and emotional investment in the conflict’s history – both her grandfathers died in Biafran refugee camps (Adichie, “African ‘Authenticity’” 50) – her perspective is mediated by the fact that she did not physically experience the war: a complex relationship which, she suggests, has definitively framed her life. The author’s decision to conceptualise

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<sup>13</sup> Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton (2005) were two early critics to offer a generational account of Nigerian literatures written in English. In their estimation, first generation writers are those who came of age prior to Nigeria’s independence from Britain, for instance Achebe, Soyinka and Flora Nwapa (Adesanmi and Dunton 14). The second generation writers are defined as those who, like Buchi Emecheta and Odia Ofeimun, reached maturity during the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s (Adesanmi and Dunton 14). Finally, the third generation was formed from the mid-1980s through to the early 2000s, and includes writers such as Sefi Atta, Biyi Bandele and Akin Adesokan (Adesanmi and Dunton 11).

<sup>14</sup> Abani has written two novels that engage with the conflict’s impact and legacies, *GraceLand* (2004) and *Song for Night* (2007), while Habila’s novel *Measuring Time* (2007) explores the way memories of the war haunt soldiers from the north of Nigeria.

the war in such spectral terms is powerfully indicative of its unresolved and entangled legacies in Nigeria. I use the word ‘entangled’ here to invoke Sarah Nuttall’s formulation of the cultural entanglement she perceives in post-apartheid South Africa. Nuttall writes that her work “is intended [...] to draw [...] critical attention to those sites and spaces in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways” (20). While Nuttall’s conception of entanglement principally works to draw out the nuances of apartheid’s historical causes and consequences in South Africa (19), it is also relevant to the understanding of Biafra’s afterlives. Indeed, *Yellow Sun* helps to flesh out the entangled forms of memorialisation, critical interrogation and creative innovation that have come to define representations of the war.

Returning to Adichie’s spectral rendering of the war’s legacies, the author goes on to articulate her motivations for writing *Yellow Sun* in expressly ethical terms: “Nobody taught me about the war in school. It is a part of our history that we like to pretend never existed, that we hide, as if hiding it will make it go away, which of course it doesn’t. As if hiding it will make the legacies any easier” (“African ‘Authenticity’” 53). This quotation justifies Adichie’s decision to write about the war by affirming that she is driven by an ethical imperative to help her fellow Nigerians engage with their history. This configuration reinforces Onuoha’s argument that the Nigerian state’s attempt to promote a univocal narrative of the war has tended “to shut down the possibility of examining ongoing reverberations of the conflict [...] by forcing a premature closure upon the event” (12). The critic and publisher Bibi Bakare-Yusuf echoes these sentiments in an article exploring the war’s cultural aftermath. She argues that “[t]he Biafra story is the incomplete story of the Nigerian nation and the suspension of resolution” (Bakare-Yusuf 247). By rendering the conflict’s legacies as such a cultural “lacuna” (Bakare-Yusuf 246), Adichie arguably authenticates her intervention by constructing a collective silence around the historical memory of Biafra: a negative void that her writing is responsible for filling and opening up.

Such a vision of the conflict's vexed and fractured legacies is arguably captured in a landscape painting by the Nigerian modernist Ben Enwonwu (see Figure 1).<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 1. Ben Enwonwu. *Storm Over Biafra*, 1972, oil on canvas. Framed: 78.6 x 154.3 x 5.2 cm. Museum purchase 2000-11-1. © Ben Enwonwu. Photograph by Franko Khoury, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

In the lower section of this stormy composition, which was produced two years after the end of the war, Enwonwu employs bold, slashing brushstrokes, evoking an entangled and skeletal mass of viscera and foliage that is held in visual tension with the clouds hanging in the upper section. Rendered through a combination of blues, browns, yellows, pinks and oranges, these clouds erupt above and illuminate the scene. On one level, the lacerating arcs of colour that envelop the canvas can be read as conveying the devastation brought to bear on the secessionist state, a reading that supports Adichie and Bakare-Yusuf's conceptions of the Biafran lacuna.

I want to nuance the idea that Biafra's artistic legacies are overwhelmingly negative or hidden, however. Biafra *has* been engaged with in tangible and meaningful ways through

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of *Storm Over Biafra* and Enwonwu's other creative responses to the conflict, see my article for *Tate Papers* titled "Weathering the Storm: Ben Enwonwu's Biafrascapes and the Crisis in the Nigerian Postcolony" (2018).

a variety of different artistic and cultural media since the end of the war. Indeed, despite its grave subject, the *Storm Over Biafra* painting is not simply dark and macabre; it also involves a kaleidoscope of different colours arrayed in a variety of shades and intensities. As I elucidate throughout the remainder of this thesis, rather than merely representing a violent wound or void in the nation's psyche, Biafra's legacies are also vibrant and highly generative. Opening up multi-layered, multimedia and even speculative spaces where modes of creative innovation, political resistance and collective transformation can be imagined as well as contested, these Biafran mediations have become a major cultural force, both in the country and beyond.

## 1.2 Reframing approaches to Biafra

As already noted, the existing scholarship on Biafra's artistic legacies has tended to focus on the proliferation of literary portrayals of the conflict since 1970. Chinyere Nwahunanya's work *A Harvest From Tragedy* (1996/7), which was the first study of Biafran war literature to treat it as a distinctive subgenre of Nigerian letters, builds on Lucien Goldmann's observation that periods of crisis are fertile ground for artists because they provoke a "great widening of affective and intellectual horizons" (qtd. in Nwahunanya 2). Nwahunanya resituates this argument in the African context, arguing that in "a continent where recurrent internal national crises daily threaten to blow up the very foundations of society, the importance of the war literature becomes apparent" (14).

A more recent work, *Torn Apart: The Nigerian Civil War and its Impact* (2010) by Francoise Ugochukwu, diverges from Nwahunanya's literary focus by engaging with the war's depiction in a diverse range of media, from novels and international radio bulletins to choral music and websites. While Ugochukwu offers original insights into the work of the French media during the war and other cultural artefacts, her analysis tends to separate rather than synthesise the materials and media under discussion, and as such seems to suggest that

artistic works responding to Biafra should be read along narrow formal lines rather than as interrelated pieces that can be placed in productive. Although *Torn Apart* makes an important intervention in the scholarship of the Biafran war, a vital aspect of this thesis's contribution to the field is its conviction that critics need to think more comparatively and creatively about the conflict's entangled artistic afterlives.

Further evidence of this critical necessity can be found in the essay collection *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* (2016), edited by Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem. While the editors frame the volume as an intellectual history as opposed to a complete critical compendium of textual responses to the conflict, they nevertheless describe the book as “the first attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the civil war writings” (Falola and Ezekwem 5). The collection certainly explores a large range of issues and texts. It includes rich investigations into the causes of the war and its reception around the world, and appraises the way writings engage with vital issues such as the history of ethnic tensions in Nigeria and Biafra and the weaponisation of rape during the conflict. However, the volume's broader four-part structure exposes the difficulties involved in trying to offer a comprehensive account of the war's textual legacies.

The four sections contain essays which respond to a particular theme. These are the history of the war, critical debates around the conflict, fictional and nonfictional responses to Biafra and the question of gender in the corpus. While these organising principles are certainly salient ones, this framework produces its own set of blind spots, with important issues such as sexuality and class being inadvertently marginalised. Indeed, the volume seems to take for granted the pre-eminence of literary responses to the conflict, with many of the chapters offering single or dual author studies of canonical figures such as Achebe, Adichie, Emecheta and Okigbo. As a consequence of this approach, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* is almost completely silent on the way artists have utilised multiple styles and experimented with visual and plastic forms in their creative responses to the conflict. Countering these

critical tendencies, the subsequent chapters of this thesis offer original multimedia and cross-genre comparisons of different artworks. For instance, the second chapter explores pieces produced by the artists Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe and Ndidi Dike, who have responded to the war by mixing forms of calligraphy, painting, poetry, prose and sculpture. The extant scholarship on Biafra's artistic legacies does not sufficiently probe or illuminate the multi-layered political dynamics and aesthetic possibilities at play in these and other creative experiments. As such, this thesis propounds more nuanced and ambitious ways of approaching the conflict's creative heritage in order to account for these complexities.

Okonta and Meagher powerfully convey the entangled nature of Biafra's overlapping socio-cultural legacies. Noting that "the Civil War and the dream of Biafran nationalism continues [*sic*] to haunt contemporary processes of state-building [in Nigeria]" (Okonta and Meagher 2), they further assert:

Biafra still has a lot to say about the struggles of citizenship and statehood in Africa. As a cautionary tale, as a symbol of democratic longing, as a rallying point for the disaffected, or a justification for foreign intervention, Biafra stands as a reminder of failure and resilience, of lessons learned and unlearned. In a quest for African solutions to African problems, interrogating the legacies of Biafra offers a useful place to start. (7)

This broad definition of Biafra's symbolic significance, which conveys its transnational dynamics as well as its destructive and transformative effects, helps to frame the scope of my project. In particular, its final gesture towards "lessons learned and unlearned" (Okonta and Meagher 7) resonates with Gayatri Spivak's disciplinary project of unlearning, which calls for intellectuals to "unlearn [our] privilege as our loss" ("Criticism, Feminism, and The Institution" 10). Spivak argues that in order to speak to the muted subaltern subject, postcolonial intellectuals must 'unlearn' their institutional and historical privilege by interrogating the discursive limits of representation as well as their positionality ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 295). Such a process of unlearning, which Spivak argues can never be

completed (“Criticism, Feminism, and The Institution” 11), works to preserve the discontinuities in theory and discourse that resist the sublimation of difference (15). Following Spivak’s lead, my project interrogates some of the reductive theoretical assumptions that have dogged the analysis of Biafra in the last half-century, and also foregrounds the way modes of irresolution affect its artistic legacies. In doing so, I demonstrate how an analysis of the artistry and aesthetics of creative works might generate new understandings of Biafra’s enduring influence.

The central theoretical foundation of this project is provided by the literary critic and philosopher Judith Butler, and specifically her work *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2010).<sup>16</sup> Butler’s study focuses principally on the ways precarious peoples have been framed and affected in relation to wars prosecuted by the United States and its allies in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. While the contextual specificity of Butler’s formulation means that it cannot be translated seamlessly to the subject of this thesis, I nevertheless intend to demonstrate its relevance for thinking through the complex mediations of the Nigeria-Biafra war since the late 1960s. Butler’s central argument is that “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power” (*Frames of War* 1). This conception of the iterative framing of conflict opens rich possibilities for studies of artistic mediations of the Biafran war and of those affected by it. It also suggests that different political, ethical and affective frameworks intersect with and disrupt the aesthetic operations at play in artistic portrayals of Biafra, and vice versa. As Butler further asserts:

When the frames of war break up or break open, when the trace of lives is apprehended at the margin of what appears or as riddling its surface, then frames unwittingly establish a grievable population despite a prevalent interdiction, and there emerges the possibility of a critical outrage, war stands the chance of missing its mark. (*Frames of War* xxx)

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<sup>16</sup> I henceforth refer to Butler’s work as *Frames of War*.



Building on this theorisation of the framing of war, a central contention of my thesis is that Biafra's artistic legacies are riven with such breakages and fissures. These fractures impact on the form and content of different kinds of frames: not just in the way they affect the content of the texts, photographs and paintings under investigation, but also in relation to the politics and ethics that mediate them. Indeed, I also draw from Butler's cognate theories of gender performativity and queer subjectivity to deepen my analysis of Biafra's complex creative heritage.

While the first chapter of the thesis explicitly explores the fissures in the framing of the Biafran war by artists such as the photographer Peter Obe and the writers Catherine Obianuju Acholonu and Ken Saro-Wiwa, it is crucial to theorise the relationship between aesthetics and politics at this early stage. Speaking to this very point, the theorist Jacques Rancière asserts that "politics is not a simple sphere of action that comes after the 'aesthetic' revelation of the state of things. It has its own aesthetic: its way of dissensually inventing scenes and characters, of manifestations and statements different from the inventions of art and sometimes even opposed to them" (83). The tense but productive enmeshment of aesthetics and politics conceptualised by Rancière also has serious implications for conceptions of the workings of artistic expression. Indeed, Rancière further asserts that art is determined by an oppositional logic: "the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all" (83). This double movement, which drives art to engage with its political context even as it attempts to forswear it, has been central in the evolution of Biafra's fissuring artistic legacies.

Two other key theoretical terms guide my analysis of the overlapping conceptual and creative frames that mediate Biafra in this thesis, namely 'articulation' and 'navigation'. I use the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's definition of the term 'articulation', which he argues has

two important functions. On the one hand, articulation “carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing” (Hall 141), which is crucial in processes of discourse formation. On the other hand, articulation is the very process through which such disparate elements can become connected (Hall 141). Hall’s conception of articulation as a mode of conditional political-aesthetic connection offers a way of reappraising the multimedia art practices that have contributed to the Biafran war’s artistic legacies, an idea that I explore in detail in the second chapter of the thesis, which considers the mixed media arts of the Nsukka group.

Related to articulation, Stephen Clingman explores the notion of navigation, casting processes of physical and imaginative movement as important tools in the production of identities and meaning. As Clingman asserts, “[n]avigation, whether internal, external, or linking the two, cannot be thought or conceived without the boundary. This is the central paradox at the heart of a transitive imagination: *navigation occurs not despite but because of the boundary*” (21, italics in original). Clingman also notes that navigation is underpinned by a “transitive syntax” (16), a linguistic formulation which he applies to transnational as well as discursive modes of movement. Each of the following chapters examines the various forms of navigation and creative transposition that have contributed to the development of these Biafran mediations, which traverse various kinds of physical, aesthetic and conceptual boundaries. In order to elaborate on these initial theoretical observations, the next section explores the deeper tapestry of multiform threads that undergird, but also disrupt, Adichie’s imaginative mapping of Biafra and Nigeria in *Yellow Sun*.

### **1.3 Entanglements and fragments in *Yellow Sun***

The novel’s structure has an important bearing upon its engagement with Biafra’s entangled shadows. The text is delineated by two non-specific yet contrapuntal time frames – ‘The Early Sixties’ and ‘The Late Sixties’ – which span the period before independence and end after Biafra’s surrender; these time frames are subdivided into four parts that progress non-

chronologically. *Yellow Sun* is a third-person narrative, but each chapter is told from the focalising perspective of one of three characters: Ugwu, the Houseboy of the pro-Biafran academic Odenigbo; Olanna, an elite Igbo Nigerian who marries Odenigbo and has a non-identical twin sister, Kainene; and Richard, an Englishman interested in Igbo-Ukwu art who falls in love with Kainene.

Ugwu, Olanna and Richard all focalise a traumatic experience in the novel, leading critics such as Amy Novak and Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira to read *Yellow Sun* as a textual negotiation of trauma. Novak argues, for instance, that the novel “belongs to the genre of contemporary trauma fiction” (33) because of its portrayal of violence perpetrated during the conflict. She further suggests that Ugwu, Olanna and Richard all exhibit “classic traumatic symptoms of disassociation and withdrawal” (Novak 33). By contrast, Ngwira focuses on the way narrative structure is foregrounded in the novel, contending that it “brings the reader into the position of witnessing the very act of turning [...] trauma into narrative” (48). While these analyses rightly highlight the significance of violence and its after effects for the novel’s characters and structure, their insistence on a trauma theoretical framework tends to render *Yellow Sun* as a psycho-social artefact rather than as a complex aesthetic negotiation of the war. As a counterpoint to these interpretations, I intend to convey the rich enmeshment of mnemonic and affective residues in the novel.

One of the most striking elements of the novel is the metafictional ‘book within a book’ that truncates the main narrative arc. Titled *The World Was Silent When We Died* and authored by the Houseboy Ugwu, this second narrative offers an alternative version of Nigeria’s and Biafra’s history, and is interspersed in fragments at the end of several chapters. The first fragment of Ugwu’s meta-text narrates his former employer Olanna’s most visceral experience of violence. It tells of her encounter with a woman holding a calabash as they flee the pogroms targeting Igbo people and other easterners in the north of Nigeria in 1966:

For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. She sat on the floor of a train squashed between crying people, shouting people, praying people.

She was silent, caressing the covered calabash on her lap in a gentle rhythm until they crossed the Niger, and then she lifted the lid and asked Olanna and others close by to look inside. (*HYS* 82)

In the novel's narrative chronology, Olanna physically encounters the calabash after the insertion of this fragment in the Late Sixties time frame (*HYS* 149). As the meta-textual fragment falls earlier in the text – at the end of chapter three during the Early Sixties time frame – the reader perceives it as a pre-emptive and proleptic textual shadow of Olanna's first-hand experience.

The non-linear historical chronology of Ugwu's metafiction strongly intimates that it is indeed a representation of trauma. As Roger Luckhurst argues in a study of trauma narratives, such formations "must fracture conventional causality" (9). Furthermore, the calabash, which is later revealed to contain the severed head of a child, reverberates throughout the novel. Speaking to this development, Novak argues that "the text stumbles against the materiality of these remains" (46) because it reinforces its "silencing of women's traumatic experience" (46). Novak's argument is that *Yellow Sun* works to elide female voices, and this is crucially tied to Ugwu's rise to authorial prominence in the novel (47). The silencing of women is evidenced most violently when Ugwu participates in the gang rape of a woman after being conscripted into the Biafran army (*HYS* 365). Although the rape victim is left unnamed and voiceless in the narrative, Ugwu's powers of expression blossom as a result of this violation, enabling him to begin atoning for his crimes through the process of writing *The World Was Silent When We Died*.

At the other end of the spectrum, the novel's most energetic female voice – Kainene – disappears from the text after travelling into Nigeria to trade in the dying days of the struggle (Novak 46–7). While Novak's analysis effectively diagnoses the troubling erasure of female voices in *Yellow Sun*, her narrow critical approach means that her article can ultimately do little more than "highlight the failures of trauma theory to grapple with the specificities of colonialism and gender" (48). In contrast to this conceptually limited conclusion, my

reading seeks to offer a more ambitious and generative elucidation of these dynamics. Indeed, my thesis as a whole considers how artistic responses to the Biafran war have looked beyond and radically interrogated such ideas. In relation to Kainene's loss in *Yellow Sun*, the conclusion illustrates that this development does not merely represent the silencing of women's voices in the narrative; it also catalyses processes of imaginative speculation and remediation.

Returning to the first metafictional fragment in *Yellow Sun*, it is much more layered and nuanced than Novak's evaluation discerns. Firstly, it is important to underscore that Ugwu chooses to frame his narrative by recounting the story of the woman with the calabash, and by so doing actively attempts to give voice to the 'silenced' woman. On the one hand, this distinctly feminist focus is indicative of Adichie's wider public intellectual work: a concern evidenced by her popular TED talk turned published essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). On the other hand, it forms part of a broader creative tradition of repudiating the marginalisation of women's stories during the conflict. As the historian Egodi Uchendu argues, both academics and journalists "had difficulty integrating women's experience in accounts dealing with diplomacy, foreign policy, military operations" (411), which resulted in women's contributions being "highly peripheral and largely ignored" (411). This paucity of women's war narratives has, as I noted earlier in the introduction, been most powerfully countered in the literary sphere, with female-authored works such as the novels *Never Again* (1975) by Nwapa, *Destination Biafra* (1982) by Emecheta and *Roses and Bullets* (2010) by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and the short story collection *Broken Lives and Other Stories* (2003) by Anthonia C. Kalu, all foregrounding the experiences of women during the struggle.

These political interests are further reflected in the first fragment of Ugwu's metafiction in *Yellow Sun*, which reveals that it is "Olanna [who] tells him this story" (HYS 82). This implies that Olanna plays a central role in enabling Ugwu's storytelling and, by extension, in ensuring that the woman's story is written and remembered. Such an effort to

express the woman's experience in spite of the traumatic materiality of the calabash becomes more intricate and generative as Olanna's encounter with the object is portrayed in the fragment:

[T]he bloodstains on the woman's wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside: scruffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face[.] (HYS 82)

Different strands of mnemonic, somatic, textile and emotional materiality are creatively stitched together in this passage. The "rusty mauve" (HYS 82), which is woven out of a mixture of blood, linear designs and plaited hair, represents a synthetic substance and affective texture fashioned out of the haunting image. Such a potent textual reimagining of the violent effects of war shows Adichie articulating as well as navigating different aspects of its legacies in order to reframe their significances.

Although the calabash continues to represent a site of loss and silence in the narrative, the texture produced by Adichie's generative rendering of the wrapper's entangled and tactile materiality also enshrines the potential for the memory and history of the war to be textually reembodyed and reactivated as an affective residue. Here, then, can be perceived the density of the war's patchy fabric, which Adichie recasts in a dynamic fashion. Indeed, as the first chapter of this thesis explores, affective mediations play a vital role in artistic responses to Biafra. Building on Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's assertion that "[a]ffect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*" (2, italics in original), the chapter proposes that complex affective mediations underpin the aesthetic transpositions of the conflict across textual, photographic and dramatic forms.

Given the multivalent textures inscribed within the first metafictional fragment of *Yellow Sun*, Novak's reading of the repressive materiality of the calabash fails to do justice to the range of possibilities imprinted by the image. By evoking a humane texture which expresses but also exceeds the confines of materiality and history, Olanna and Ugwu's

constitutive reimagining of Biafra corresponds with Butler's argument that "when the frames of war break up or break open [...], [they] unwittingly establish a grievable population despite a prevalent interdiction" (*Frames of War* xxx). I would argue that Adichie's tangled and fragmented novelisation of Biafra grapples with this ethical imperative at every turn.

#### 1.4 Queer compositions of difference

Adichie's entangled aesthetic also lays bare some of the destructive socio-political and ethno-identitarian fissures that affect Biafra's legacies. An example of this can be perceived in the novel's portrayal of Mohammed, the former boyfriend of Olanna who is also one of the few named Hausa and Muslim characters in the text. From the moment Mohammed appears in the narrative, numerous descriptions draw attention to the feminine qualities of his appearance. For instance, it is revealed that "[h]is lips were a sensual curve" (*HYS* 44) and that "[h]is tall slim body and tapering fingers spoke of fragility, gentleness" (45); it is also disclosed that Olanna "used to tease him about being prettier than she was" (44). On the one hand, these remarks crudely exaggerate the physical differences between Mohammed and Odenigbo in order to justify Olanna's choice of partner. The retelling of Olanna's first meeting with Odenigbo attests to this: "Olanna stared at him, at the arch of his eyebrows behind glasses, the thickness of his body, already thinking of the least hurtful way to untangle herself from Mohammed" (*HYS* 29). Odenigbo's muscled physique and spectacles work to portray him as a masculine intellectual; much more attractive to Olanna than the effeminate Mohammed with his "red sports car" (*HYS* 45). Although this blunt contrast is incidental in terms of the narrative's broader progression, it nevertheless lays bare a problematic fissure in the novel's portrayal of Nigeria's varied cultural terrain. Indeed, the superficial and even denigrative depiction of Mohammed in *Yellow Sun* suggests that questions of his religious, ethno-linguistic and sexual identity are bound up with these creative decisions.

Given that the divisions between Nigeria's predominantly Christian south and largely

Muslim north contributed to the tensions that ultimately led to Biafra's secession, Adichie's reductive portrayal of Mohammed reveals that her novel cannot overcome the entrenched prejudices in the country. Indeed, as Daniel Egiegba Agbibo argues in an article exploring the history of ethno-religious relations in Nigeria, "[r]ecurrent religio[us] conflicts, especially between Christians and Muslims, [...] have stymied various attempts at national integration" (4). As religion continues to be a major cultural and political force in the state, the fact that Adichie fails to add nuance to her portrayal of an important Muslim character underscores the dangers inherent in trying to remap the history of a period as divisive as the Biafran war in a balanced and politically sensitive manner. Moreover, while Adichie has been a vocal supporter of LGBTQ+ rights in Nigeria, it is striking that *Yellow Sun* appears to reinforce rather than resist hetero-normative and gender-normative identity structures.<sup>17</sup>

As such, while the novel's exploration of Nigeria's multi-religious and multicultural make-up brings some balance to its otherwise Igbo-dominated cast of characters, it often leaves those who represent other identities stereotyped and marginalised. Indeed, although the text as a whole tries to mediate the tangled web of narratives and differences woven into the history of Biafra, the sheer malleability and slipperiness of those legacies leads Adichie to inadvertently occlude the potential for new connections and transformations to be instantiated, even as she enshrines those possibilities on various registers. Developing this line of thought, I further argue that the portrayal of Mohammed reveals a complex and queer dynamic in *Yellow Sun*: one indicative of wider dynamics in the Biafran war arts.

In the editorial essay of a special issue of *Wasafiri* dedicated to the "Queer Postcolonial" (2007), Sara Salih asserts that a queer postcolonial reading "may suggest interpretive possibilities in which the complexities of national, sexual, gendered and

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<sup>17</sup> In terms of Adichie's support of LGBTQ+ rights, the writer published a short story titled "Why can't he just be like everyone else?" (2014) in response to the Nigerian government passing the draconian Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (Kaleidoscope Trust 1). However, as Mia Fischer explains, Adichie has also been criticised for comments pertaining to the gender identity of trans women (896–9).



economic positionalities are acknowledged and critiqued, short-circuiting any recourse to the clichés of nationalism” (3). This account usefully emphasises the “constructive instability” (Salih 4) of queer postcoloniality, and offers a way of recovering the creative potential in the identitarian and political fissures that run through *Yellow Sun*. The fact that the queering representation of Mohammed remains unelaborated in this novel about Biafra despite its subversive function, arguably supports such a reading of postcoloniality’s queer and destabilising potential. Indeed, as the third chapter of this thesis asserts, a queer dynamic is woven through several artistic responses to Biafra, suggesting that the complexity of the war’s significance has catalysed radical queering effects.

### 1.5 Fraying at the seams: Adaptation, memorialisation, speculation

How might the disruptive and contradictory forces at play in the war’s legacies be summed up? The Nigerian author Helon Habila offers one response to this question during a discussion about his novel *Measuring Time* (2007), a work which engages with Biafra. After asserting that wars are a godsend to writers because they “bring [...] out the basest as well as the noblest in us” (Habila, “Some Things Just Cannot Wait” para. 11), Habila contends:

The Nigerian civil war in particular has become a sort of metaphor for the situation we happen to find ourselves in, it seems a war is raging in our midst over the question of whether we are strong enough to put aside the legacy of hatred and sectionalism and divide and rule and narrow ethnicism and opportunism and elitism left to us by the colonialists and embrace what we have in common and move on. As it is now there is no single dominant philosophy holding us together as a nation – to survive as a nation we must have that. (para. 11)

Habila views Biafra as a grand but problematic metaphor for the fundamental fissures that have threatened Nigeria’s precarious unity since the colonial period. It is a substitutive sign that always gestures beyond what it is used to signify: one that cannot be contained by any single narrative or framework. On the one hand, this recalls Onuoha’s argument that the Nigerian state has failed to forge a grand historical narrative out of the war’s memory capable of reconciling the deep divisions that it provoked (“Shared Histories” 12). On the other,

Habila's statement resonates with Soyinka's response to the recent pro-Biafra demonstrations in south-eastern Nigeria. Reiterating a point he made during the war, Soyinka again asserted that the idea of Biafra cannot be defeated (qtd. in Adekunle paras. 3–4). This formulation demonstrates the mythic as well as political force of the conflict's legacies, and, as the conclusion to this thesis argues, Biafra's mythic significance has had both speculative and obscuring effects.

While these responses to Biafra help contextualise and illuminate the dissonances woven into Adichie's text, I am particularly struck by the way Habila casts Biafra as a metaphor that both precludes and underwrites the possibility of a collective philosophical vision for Nigeria. Voids and silences are certainly woven into the Biafran metaphor, which the portrayal of Mohammed in *Yellow Sun* importantly illustrates. Yet Habila also suggests that those lacunae have a shape and texture, inscribing promise as well as pain into the war's mediated afterlives. *Yellow Sun* articulates this complexity in vivid terms, casting the cultural and historical legacies of Biafra as an intricate but patchy fabric of remembrance. As I have intimated, however, this complexity also contains speculative possibilities. The novel closes with the final fragment of Ugwu's text: "Ugwu writes his dedication last: For My Master, my good man" (HYS 433). This closing gesture marks the commencement of a new narrative of Biafra, making a proleptic textual leap towards alternative narrative formations of the war.

Such a conception of Biafra's speculative potential is also explored in the final lines of Tobrise's poem "Dyeing": "Had I any choice / I would dip them in scarlet, / to mark the end of waiting" (215). In this fragment, the red dye intimates a creative but also troubling refashioning of legacies of violence, speculating the possibility of transformation even as it enshrines the risks involved in revisiting histories and memories of suffering. This speculative material, so the poem suggests, can only imagine conditional futures; alternative formations that carry with them no guarantees. Given these obscure speculations, the textile fabric woven through *Yellow Sun* and other works should be seen as reopening rather than closing

the book on the war's fraught legacies in Nigeria. They act as a testament to the ethical and creative imperative to project the tangled legacies of Biafra beyond the page into new spaces despite the pressing dangers.

The 2013 film adaptation of *Yellow Sun*, directed by the writer and filmmaker Biyi Bandele, embodies the potentialities as well as limitations of the Biafran metaphor. Although Adichie has stated that she enjoyed the film ("Hiding From Our Past" para. 7), overall it is a superficial and romanticised cinematic translation that lacks the aesthetic richness and emotional nuance of the novel. It strips back the text's polyphonic cadences in order to focus on the romantic travails of Olanna, Odenigbo, Kainene and Richard. While this renders the film as a somewhat threadbare reincarnation of the book, such a process of formal transposition also enables the narrative to operate in new registers and to communicate with new audiences. Indeed, the romanticised and nostalgic quality of Bandele's film – which privileges visual style over narrative substance – is redolent of the popular Nigerian film phenomenon known as Nollywood.

For the video and installation artist Zina Saro-Wiwa, Nollywood "breaks many film-making rules and does not often get away with them. [...] These films occupy an intriguingly ambiguous realm that is between [...] the hyper real and the totally unrealistic" (24). However, despite the "low budget aesthetic" (Saro-Wiwa, "No Going Back" 24) of many Nollywood productions, Saro-Wiwa goes on to argue that "for many Nigerians, part of the joy of watching these films is simply seeing Nigeria reflected back at them" (24). The sheer popularity of Nollywood cinema in Nigeria, which is also watched throughout Africa and the diasporas, helps explain why the film adaptation of *Yellow Sun* – a work that shares several characteristics with the genre – caused a media storm upon its release. The Nigerian government initially prevented its distribution, arguing that its depiction of sectarian conflict might incite violence in the country (Adichie, "Hiding From Our Past" para. 3). The film was eventually released in Nigeria after a politically sensitive scene had been cut, and it went

on to set a new first weekend box-office record in the country (“Half of a Yellow Sun sets” para. 1). I would argue that Adichie anticipates the strong public reaction to the film adaptation in the discourses around the text of *Yellow Sun*.

In the conclusion to her essay “African ‘Authenticity’”, Adichie suggests that the novel is “more of a love story than a war story; it is a book about love, about the human complexity of our flawed and rich African world” (53). For Adichie, love, which is the preoccupation of many a Nollywood film, functions as an expansive metaphor for the humane and speculative enfolding of passion, innovation, hope and despair that constitute her novel, and which also affect its multimedia iterations. As Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas argue in their study of the significance of such modes of adaptation in the modern media age, they are “explicitly political[, representing] a continual negotiation of existing social, cultural, and economic hierarchies that can be reaffirmed but also challenged by the new ways in which adaptations are circulated and appropriated” (1). The transmission of *Yellow Sun* across different media has reenergised debates about the war’s legacies, and by so doing has resisted the frames that attempt to maintain institutional narratives and social silences around Biafra.

## 1.6 Thesis outline

The subsequent chapters approach Biafra’s artistic legacies from a range of mediating perspectives. Each analyses the creative responses of different artists who represent a variety of backgrounds and political perspectives, and who employ a range of aesthetic practices. The first chapter offers a comparative analysis of the construction of several of these responses, and places a particular emphasis on the representations of refugees and soldiers within them. By interrogating the formal and rhetorical framing of such peoples in three distinctive works – a photographic narrative by Peter Obe, a play by Catherine Acholonu and a novel by Ken Saro-Wiwa – the chapter uncovers disruptive developments in Biafra’s

artistic corpus. Drawing on the aesthetic and political theorisations of Butler, Achille Mbembe, Hillary L. Chute, Roland Barthes and others, it argues that these narratives of the war ‘formful’ Biafra, embodying a precarious, rupturing impulse that resists and plays with the frameworks that try to contain them. These fissures in the frame of Biafra’s artistic reception have precipitated new kinds of reflexive and affective expression that strain the limits of representational forms.

Building on this analysis, the second chapter considers the wider political and poetic ramifications of the Biafran war’s artistic mediation. It focuses on the multimedia arts of members of the Nsukka group of artists: a loose confederation of creative practitioners who have taught or studied at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. As the Nsukka art school has been at the vanguard of creative interrogations of the war in Nigeria, the chapter focuses on some of the group’s most renowned members, namely Obiora Udechukwu, Ndidi Dike, Olu Oguibe and Ada Udechukwu. I argue that despite the contrasts in their experiences and creative outputs, Biafra – and particularly the biographical and aesthetic significances of exile which are bound up with it – plays a vital role in their arts.

The third chapter principally considers Chinelo Okparanta’s queer reworking of the war in her novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). The text is framed as an attempt to write LGBTQ+ Nigerians into their country’s history, and my analysis probes the queering of Biafra that this and other works instantiate. Comparing Okparanta’s novel with creative responses by the pamphleteer Ogali A. Ogali, the photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode and others, the chapter argues that a distinctively queer dynamic runs through Biafra’s creative legacies. Indeed, I assert that these artists’ explorations of Biafra engage with the variously dissident, taboo and imaginative potentialities of the conflict, enabling them to offer subversive and transformative visions of post-war Nigeria. By refracting the war through

queer as well as oneiric lenses, these artists probe the promise of Biafra as a disruptive element within Nigeria's postcolonial cultural imaginary.

Finally, the conclusion to the thesis proposes that a complex and speculative semiotics irrigates the critical-creative propensities inscribed within Biafra's artistic heritage. By examining the speculative mediations manifested in Adichie's *Yellow Sun*, a short story by Lesley Nneka Arimah and a sign painting by Middle Art, I argue that processes of obscure speculation have been central in promulgating the war's legacies in the arts. To sum up, this and each of the other sections investigates the imaginative ways that Nigerian artists have traversed the limits of genre, style, geography and politics in their responses to the Nigeria-Biafra war. By tracing the multi-layered threads that fray and intertwine within Biafra's patchy fabric, the thesis sheds new light on the fraught but generative relationship between modes of artistic mediation and legacies of violent conflict and political crisis.

## 2) Transposing Biafra through the visual, textual and performing arts

We are adaptable because as a people we are convinced that in the world 'no condition is permanent'. (Ojukwu, *The Abiara Declaration: Principles of the Biafran Revolution* 301)

These words were first spoken by the Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Odemugwu Ojukwu, as part of a public address given on 1 June 1969. Announced during the latter months of the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, *The Abiara Declaration*, which was also published in pamphlet form, sought to boost the morale of the Biafran population even as the state teetered on the brink of collapse. The short excerpt quoted above illustrates this aim, appealing to Biafrans to persevere and transform themselves in order to keep the struggle alive. The declaration's invocation of the impermanence and transience of human existence also makes an enigmatic, even prophetic claim about the war's future reception and reimagining by artists. Exploring the wider cultural ramifications and theoretical possibilities of this charged dynamic, this chapter offers a comparative analysis of artistic transpositions of Biafra across various visual, textual and performative media. As I noted in the introduction, the Biafran war and refugee crisis produced some of the most iconic humanitarian images of the twentieth century. By interrogating the formal and rhetorical framing of refugees and soldiers in a photographic narrative by Peter Obe titled *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures* (1971), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A novel in rotten English* (1985), and Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's play *Into the Heart of Biafra* (1985), this chapter illuminates some of the creative ways artists have responded to Biafra's seminal significance.<sup>18</sup>

I have chosen these distinctive works as the primary materials for this chapter's analysis because they offer a range of contextual and generic perspectives on the conflict and, when taken together, give a sense of the imaginative, formal and political breadth of Biafra's artistic legacies. Firstly, I have chosen Saro-Wiwa's novel because, as an Ogoni writer and

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<sup>18</sup> I henceforth refer to Obe's and Saro-Wiwa's narratives as *Nigeria: A decade of crises* and *Sozaboy* respectively.

activist who was executed by the Nigerian Military Government in 1995 for his involvement in the Ogoni movement – a campaign which drew attention to the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta by the oil company Shell – Saro-Wiwa writes *Sozaboy* from the perspective of a minority ethnic population within the secessionist enclave.<sup>19</sup> This distinguishes his novel from the creations of Obe and Acholonu, who are Yoruba and Igbo respectively, while its stylistic idiosyncrasy and ‘rotteness’ also mark it out from the majority of Biafran war novels. Secondly, I have chosen Obe's photographic narrative because it offers a rare Nigerian perspective on the iconic imagery of emaciated Biafran refugees and orphans made famous by the widely disseminated photographs of foreign journalists such as Don McCullin.<sup>20</sup> Also, given Obe's relatively close relationship with the Nigerian military leadership – as will be revealed – his photographic response to the Biafran war is affected by various political pressures in its negotiation of the vexed issue of post-war reconciliation. Thirdly, I have opted to study Acholonu's play in the chapter because the writer is not generally included in studies of Biafran literature or Nigerian theatre. This, I suggest, is due to a lack of awareness of her war writings, which span poetry as well as drama, and to the explicit way that *Into the Heart* engages with the spectacle of the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

While Acholonu's poetic output has received some critical attention, she is best known in Nigeria for her advisory and scholarly work rather than her creative practice.<sup>22</sup> Acholonu was a Special Advisor on Arts and Culture to President Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2002, and she was the founder of the Catherine Acholonu Research Center, an organisation dedicated to the study of African culture (“Professor Catherine Acholonu”

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of Saro-Wiwa's environmental activism and writings, see Chapter 3 of Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Lasse Heerten describes McCullin as “[p]erhaps the most prestigious photographer to work in Biafra [...]. The *Sunday Times Magazine* foreign correspondent was part of a new caste of photographers who had begun to revive and reinvent the tradition of critical social photography of the interwar period” (119–20).

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the first section of Acholonu's poetry collection *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (1985) is titled “Poems On War...”, and it explores themes such as the refugee experience and the memory of conflict.

<sup>22</sup> Other scholarly responses to Acholonu's creative writings include articles by Obi Maduakor (1989) and Ode S. Ogede (1999).



paras. 1–2). Although her creative output is relatively small, which is perhaps a consequence of these other interests, the fact that she has produced multiple responses to the conflict using different genres means her work deserves greater critical attention in Biafran war scholarship.

This chapter contends that an examination of the mechanics of representation and politics underpinning these three distinctive works reveals generative fissures in the frame of the war's artistic reception. In my analysis, I define this process of political-aesthetic rupturing and transposition as – to borrow a term from *Sozaboy* – “formfooling” (*Sozaboy* 128). This neologism, which is explicated in the novel's glossary as a silly mistake or an instance of fooling around (*Sozaboy* 183), appears at several points in the narrative to describe moments when its soldier-protagonist engages in acts of deception or reflects on the perilousness of his position as he becomes embroiled in conflict. I explore the specific usage and significance of formfooling in *Sozaboy* later in the chapter, but for now want to suggest that the transgressive processes and subversive potential connoted by the concept make it a productive analytic tool for working through the both narrative and stylistic fissures that traverse Biafra-inflected artworks.

Such a modality, I assert, foregrounds the formal foundations of representations of Biafra even as it subverts and breaks those codes. This notion of formfooling can be linked to Judith Butler's theorisation of the framing of human precariousness in war. As noted in the introduction, Butler argues that “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power” (*Frames of War* 1). Following Butler's lead, this chapter is concerned with the way processes of framing affect different artistic responses to the Biafran war. It also explores how different political, ethical and affective frameworks intersect with and are subverted by – through processes of formfooling – the aesthetic operations of those narratives. In doing so, the chapter responds to Achille

Mbembe's delineation of the necropolitical work of war machines, to Hillary L. Chute's study of the depiction of war and crisis in the graphic form of comics and Gil Z. Hochberg's exploration of the deployment and manipulation of the visual field in conflict zones. As these theoretical models all explore the aesthetic as well as political construction of warzones, my analysis will transpose their findings onto the artistic legacies of the Biafran conflict. The chapter also resists critical interpretations that read Biafran war narratives as being primarily concerned with interrogating the socio-political legacies of the conflict, rather than as complex poetic and emotive artefacts. By synthesising scholarship from the burgeoning field of affect theory – notably Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie's tripartite definition, after Felix Guattari, of affect as “transitive” (Bertelsen and Murphie 140), “physical” (140) and “in constant variation” (140) – I supplement extant discourse on Biafra's artistic legacies by uncovering a deeper layer of affective mediation in these creative works.

While I am not suggesting that artists have always consciously channelled a formfooling dynamism in their responses to Biafra, I nevertheless assert that when read together, the works under investigation in this chapter offer a generative and enigmatic mediation of the precarious lives of both perpetrators and victims of the war, and of the precariousness of representational forms more broadly. This negotiation, I further suggest, constantly effects a need for ethical responsiveness, urgently challenging audiences both within Nigeria and without to interrogate narrow interpretations of the conflict. Indeed, as these narratives try to render the terrible human suffering engendered by the struggle, the chapter's dialectical exploration of their fractured framings of Biafra inscribe this violent history with the potential to produce manifold affective responses. This generative modality, wrought through the continual contestation and transposition of the frames of war, creates a space for humour and levity as well as suffering and terror. In sum, these artistic responses offer powerful rejoinders to readings of historical violence as entirely overwhelming and

totalising, and in doing so forge more conditional and reflexive forms of creative remembrance.

## 2.1 Breaking the frame: Narrative and stylistic subversions

In recent years, a flurry of scholarship has explored the relationship between Biafra and the development of humanitarian campaigns and iconography in the latter part of the twentieth century. For instance, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos argues that Biafra represented a media success story, as global awareness of the conflict was largely generated by the dissemination of images of Biafran refugees (70). Pérouse de Montclos goes on to complicate this view, however, by asserting that the reality of the Biafran humanitarian situation has subsequently been “lost in translation” (70).<sup>23</sup> This confusion has resulted from scholars and commentators focusing their analyses too narrowly on the efforts of guerrilla forces, rather than on the wider significance of the logistical and political failings of the aid efforts (Pérouse de Montclos 72). The scholar Lasse Heerten also elucidates a form of representational loss bound up with media constructions of the Biafran emergency. Analysing the way aid agencies and journalists invoked comparisons between the Nigeria-Biafra war and the Nazi Holocaust through their portrayal of children suffering from malnutrition in Biafra (Heerten 141), Heerten contends that the conflict

was inscribed into an iconography and rhetoric of genocide comparisons, with the Holocaust as its Ur-Gestalt. This analogy did not leave a lot of space for the analysis of complex political systems. In the course of the war, it became apparent that the Nigerian Civil War could not be integrated into simple narratives – the Biafrans were not mere ‘innocent victims’ but a party in a complicated conflict. (288)

As with Pérouse de Montclos’ assessment of the failure of humanitarian discourses to accurately translate the realities of the Biafran campaign, Heerten shows that attempts to reframe images of Biafran refugees to manipulate the reception of the war fell short because

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<sup>23</sup> Pérouse de Montclos also suggests that this visual vocabulary set the tone for the subsequent media coverage of other famine-stricken parts of the African continent, most notably in Ethiopia in 1984 and Somalia in 1992 (70).

they were based on a false conflation of very different histories. Indeed, Heerten goes on to conclude that “[w]hen it turned out that [the Holocaust] frame of reference did not match the Nigerian Civil War, the image act ‘Biafra’ lost its power” (289). This suggestive reference to framing, which invokes Butler’s theorisation of the term, underscores the value of critical approaches to Biafra that highlight the vital interconnections between aesthetics and politics. Such an analysis also corresponds with Michael Rothberg’s theorisation of multidirectional memory, which explores the conceptual instability of the Holocaust as a mnemonic basis for historical comparison (524–5).

Although this chapter is not primarily concerned with exploring the politics of Biafra’s humanitarian heritage, I am interested in the way that both Pérouse de Montclos and Heerten highlight the difficulties involved in trying to successfully transpose, contain and represent the image act of Biafra in humanitarian discourses. While their analyses are grounded in social science methodologies, both give primacy to the significance of formal mediation – in visual as well as textual domains – and open up a productive space for aesthetic as well as socio-political interrogations. Such an approach has, in my opinion, been lacking in the scholarship of Biafran war arts. For example, in Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem’s recent critical volume *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* (2016), the only chapter dedicated to propounding a thorough theoretical account of the construction of the war’s significance and representation – written by Bukola A. Oyeniyi – is grounded exclusively in economic and social conflict theories (114). And yet, while Pérouse de Montclos’ and Heerten’s essays represent important conceptual catalysts for my analysis of the creative rendering of refugees in artistic responses to Biafra, this chapter moves beyond their observations by offering a detailed theorisation of the aesthetic mechanics underpinning the representational and interpretive instability they perceive.

While Heerten draws attention to the significance of photographic iconography in the media’s construction and reception of Biafra, little work has been done on images

produced by Nigerians or Biafrans during this period. As such, Obe's photographic narrative makes a vital contribution to the war's visual archive. Published a year after the conflict's close in 1971, *Nigeria: A decade of crises* was compiled with the express purpose of supporting the reunification effort following Biafra's reincorporation into the Nigerian state. The book's title reinforces this aim by forging a link between the era of independence and the Biafran crisis, which casts the post-war period as an opportunity for the Nigerian nation to reflect on its past failings and to commence a new chapter in its history. This political motivation is emphasised in the short explanatory essay that accompanies the collection. In it, Obe writes:

The reconstruction problem that lies ahead is immense, but the spirit of reconciliation with which Nigerians received their separated brethren from the East Central State gives a sound basis for hope that all will be well in the end and that all Nigerians have resumed their steady march to future greatness. (24)

On the one hand, this statement reinforces the 'official narrative' propounded by the Nigerian state that, as Onuoha argues, seeks to cast the war as a struggle for national unity ("Shared Histories" 4). Indeed, the uniqueness of this image archive stems from the photographer's extensive access to and close relations with the upper echelons of the Nigerian military government during the conflict. This privileged access is foregrounded throughout the collection, most markedly in the series of photographs depicting the Military head of state Yakubu Gowon's wartime wedding (Obe 108–10).

Obe offers various intimate insights into the war throughout the collection. Yet it is in the climactic section of images, which depict Biafran refugee children being welcomed by Nigerian officials after their return from evacuation centres in Ivory Coast (see Figures 2 and 3), that the complex aesthetic framing of this war narrative is most distinctly articulated.

Fig. 2. Peter Obe. *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 199. Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

Fig. 3. Peter Obe. *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 200. Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

Gowon features prominently in both of these photographs, further highlighting Obe's connection to the upper echelons of the Nigerian political-military establishment. However, this creative choice also demonstrates that art is not simply a reflection of the political context

in which it is created and received. It is also deeply involved in shaping and disseminating the politics it purports to represent.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, these images demonstrate that the Nigerian leadership of the day wanted to utilise the visual power of Obe's photographs as a way of bolstering efforts to mend Nigeria's torn social fabric in the aftermath of the war. Such an attempt by the country's leaders to co-opt the arts for political purposes would be repeated later in the 1970s, when the government – flush with oil revenues that came to Nigeria as a result of Biafra's defeat – elected to host the Second World Festival of Black Arts and Culture, also known as FESTAC, in Lagos in 1977. The follow up to an event held in 1966 in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, FESTAC was in part intended “to promote a vision of pan-Africanism while also gilding the status of the organising nation state” (Murphy para. 35). While these examples show the Nigerian government using the arts for political ends following the Biafran war, I now suggest that a number of Obe's photographs fail to fulfil, and thus also resist, the politico-aesthetic frames attempting to contain them. Failure, as the theorist Judith Halberstam formulates it, “may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). I want to pursue the subversive potential of such failings in artistic responses to the Biafran war.

On the surface, Figures 2 and 3 synecdochically embody and celebrate the post-war reintegration of Biafra into Nigeria through the staging of conventional scenes of familial reunification. Indeed, they work to express the Nigerian state's “no victors, no vanquished” (Asika 80) rhetoric, a conciliatory stance that aimed at fostering a spirit of unity after the war. Furthermore, the photographs' depiction of healthy and smartly dressed Biafran children offers a subtle but striking visual counterpoint to the classic images of emaciated infants that so dominated media portrayals of the Biafran crisis. While the idea of counterpoint stems from musical rather than visual aesthetics, and the ‘still’ form of photographs does not

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<sup>24</sup> As Murray Edelman argues in *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (1995), “[a]rt forms are incorporated into governmental processes themselves, influencing authority and subordination” (3).

express an explicitly rhythmic aspect, the employment of imagery that resonates with but crucially diverges from the 'Biafran baby' iconography does open up a semiotic space where visual cadences can be compared and interrogated contrapuntally.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, these compositional choices expose a deeper negotiation of Biafra's political impact by giving shape to the particular power struggles and residual contestations that continue to undermine the unity of post-war Nigeria.

Firstly, the contrasting *mise en scène* of the two images work to produce alternative visions of the politics which underwrote but also undermined Biafra's reincorporation into the Nigerian fold. On the one hand, Figure 2 stages a moment of parental interaction that underscores the uneven power relationship between father and child. Gowon, whose body dominates the foreground of the frame, leans down over the Biafran refugee held in the arms of a woman. By representing the three main figures in the style of a family portrait, the image reinforces the state's desire to present the Nigerian nation as united despite the ravages of the conflict. On the other hand, by emphasising the size-disparity between Gowon and the child, it also casts his welcoming gesture as an overtly performative display of authority. When overlaid with the broader narrative of Biafra's then recent demise at the hands of Nigeria – reinforced by Gowon's symbolic choice of martial attire – the supportive hand placed on the powerless Biafran child's shoulder becomes an exaggerated show of strength by a paternalistic state reeling from an unexpectedly costly struggle. As such, the image works to subvert the Nigerian state's reconciliation mantra by visually indexing, and overstating, the uneven power relationship between Nigeria and the defeated secessionist nation. Indeed,

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<sup>25</sup> I use Erin Lafford's reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry to theorise this formulation of the visual counterpoint. Lafford argues that "[i]t is in the visual, not the musically metrical, poetics of Hopkins that his counterpoint is given the space it needs to be executed properly" (255). This form of counterpoint, so Lafford asserts, "utilis[es] the act of looking to shape that space" (Lafford 255). This analysis corresponds with the modes of collective and international witnessing that have shaped Biafra's cultural reception. Another touchstone influence in terms of reconfiguring the idea of counterpoint is the theorist Edward W. Said's work. As Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a "contrapuntal reading" (79) of a text will "open it out to what went into it and to what its author excluded" (79), and thus will draw out the different power dynamics – be they imperialistic or revolutionary – at play in a work of literature.



rather than welcoming Biafrans back to Nigeria with open arms and on equal terms, the photograph suggests that the victorious but shaken military government will instead try to reassert its authority over the infantile Biafrans by pursuing a policy of deterrence designed to guard against future reprisals. Such a punitive sentiment is conveyed in the public address Gowon gave announcing Biafra's capitulation on 17 January 1970. He proclaimed: "It will be a great disservice for anyone to continue to use the word 'Biafra' to refer to any part of the East Central State of Nigeria" ("Speech to the Nation" *YouTube*). The anxiety that underpins this warning from the Nigerian leadership is clearly captured in the composition of Figure 2.

By contrast, Figure 3 – the final in Obe's collection – offers a more visually balanced staging of the Nigeria-Biafra détente. The camera's perspective lends Gowon and the child near equal status within the frame – although the adult body still dominates – which suggests that the newly reunified Nigerian state will instantiate a reciprocal dialogue between different groups and work for a more mutually assured relationship with erstwhile Biafrans. However, this visual symmetry implies opposition as well as reciprocity, and the slight blurring of Gowon's features – in contrast to the child's stillness – casts the military state as an active, dynamic agent and the Biafrans as passive recipients of their decrees. By drawing out the political structures and forces that underpin them, these images arguably enact Butler's call for visual representations of war to "thematize the forcible frame, the one that [...] restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be" (*Frames of War* 100). Obe's photographs work, then, to highlight the political frameworks that helped to produce them.

A more striking aesthetic rupture is inscribed in these photographs, however; captured in the peculiar facial expressions of the refugee children. While their distinctly joyless faces undermine the staged jubilation of the repatriation scene, more significant is the way their visual presence in the photographs renders them as both reminders and remainders of the conflict. Indeed, while Obe may intend to cast the children as symbols of hope in the

aftermath of a bitter struggle, the fact that they are evacuees and survivors of the Biafran war means they also subliminally invoke the icons of emaciated infants that so defined the conflict's reception. The children's presence therefore spectrally reinvokes those haunting images in the photographic narrative even as their healthsome forms seek to overwrite those terrible artefacts. As Susan Sontag argues in *On Photography* (1977), "[p]hotographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (70). Writing in the aftermath of the Vietnam war (1955–75) – another globalised internecine conflict – Sontag's analysis is nevertheless influenced by the Biafran war. Indeed, the theorist directly refers to Biafra in a passage exploring the connection between the familiarity of images of suffering and their affective force (Sontag 19).<sup>26</sup>

In Butler's reading of Sontag's work, the interpretation of photographs as precarious remnants foreshadowing their subject's destruction resonates with Roland Barthes' argument in *Camera Lucida* (1980) that photography has the power to cast the lives it portrays in the tense of the future anterior, chronicling both what has been and what will have been (Butler, *Frames of War* 96–7). In this vein, Obe's images arguably offer a complex mediation of his subjects' vulnerability and temporality. On the surface, the orphaned children's healthful forms contrast and thus repudiate the ubiquitous images of suffering Biafrans: an aesthetic decision that seeks to reconcile and transcend the violence of the war. However, as the photographs are always already haunted by death as Sontag suggests, they act as a visual counterpoint to those earlier icons. They work to reinscribe, necessarily, the spectre of the Biafran conflict within Obe's pictures even as they ostensibly overcome them.

The future lives (and deaths) of these children are thus bound up with the violent past of Biafra. Their bemused indifference to the attention being lavished on them by the

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<sup>26</sup> Sontag suggests that photographs of emaciated children in Biafra had less of an emotional impact than those of other humanitarian disasters because images of the former "had become banal" (19) through their widespread dissemination.

Nigerian state serves as a powerful rejoinder to cultural artefacts that attempt to reconcile or contain such iconography within a reunification narrative.<sup>27</sup> And yet, the contrast produced in Figure 3 between Gowon's affected agitation and the child's transfixed indifference also suggests that the Nigerian state will always be haunted, and by degrees threatened, by the material traces and ethical quandaries of that irrevocable past. As Butler further argues in relation to Sontag's work on photographs, the ethical significance of photographs stems from their refusal to be fully co-opted into the viewer's narcissistic desire to see and consume (Butler, *Frames of War* 100). In a comparable way, Obe's images invoke but also unhinge the different frames that have been used to construct the iconography of the Biafran war. By doing so, they unravel the grand narrative of Nigeria's post-war reconstitution even as they work to give it form. This process of formfooling, which makes manifest the political-aesthetic fissures in the war's cultural reception, runs through and connects the works of Obe, Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa. As the subsequent sections illustrate, their artworks foreground as well as recast the formative frames of Biafra's legacies to produce alternative grounds for the war's continued cultural negotiation.

## 2.2 The aesthetics and architecture of formfooling

The aesthetic refusal of the final photographs in *Nigeria: A decade of crises* to surrender to the role written for them in Obe's narrative – embodying a formfooling modality as they do so – resonates with Catherine Acholonu's engagement with the discursive and performative mediation of the Biafran refugee figure in her play *Into the Heart of Biafra*.<sup>28</sup> The dramatic narrative documents the wartime struggles of a family forced to flee their home in Biafra.

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<sup>27</sup> In addition to Asika's "No Victors, No Vanquished" dictum, another example of this 'official narrative' can be found in Olusegun Obasanjo's war memoir *My Command: an account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970* (1980). As a general, Obasanjo played a significant role in bringing the civil war to a close. He famously commanded the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Commando Division (Obasanjo xii) and was instrumental in bringing about Biafra's surrender on 12 January (Obasanjo 121). Obasanjo later served two terms as Nigeria's Head of State: first as the country's military ruler (1976–9), and second as a democratically elected president (1999–2007).

<sup>28</sup> I henceforth refer to the play as *Into the Heart* in my main analysis and as *IHB* when quoting from the play-text.

The family becomes separated during the first scene of the play when Chume, a man who frets more for the safety of his Chieftain's regalia than his family, flees into the bush during an air raid and leaves his wife Mona alone with their children. By the second act, Mona and her children have come to occupy a room in a decrepit refugee camp: one which they share with several other displaced and malnourished families. At the beginning of the act, Mona, who in an earlier scene recalls the traumatic miscarriage of her youngest child during an air raid as something that she "cannot put into words" (*IHB* 21), tries to break out of the straitjacket of silence forced on her and the others by the rhetoric that developed out of the Biafran refugee crisis:

MONA: (*aloud to no one in particular*): What is keeping them today? Do they want us to die of hunger? (*No reply, Mona is exasperated*) Are you people deaf? Why is everybody silent? (*Eyes turn slowly towards her, then slowly away from her. Still there is no reply. Mona rises to her feet, her baby on her chest. Hysterically she runs to one corner of the room, then to another shouting all the time. Her old resolve crumples, as she slumps down on her knees and weeps.*) (*IHB* 35, italics in original)

This moment mirrors, but also performatively refigures, the active mediation of narrative frames and spectrality inscribed within Obe's photographs of the Biafran children. Mona's question – "Do they want us to die of hunger?" (*IHB* 35) – instantiates the unstable temporal positioning of the refugee by invoking the deaths that have both already occurred and which are still to be caused. Mona also highlights the shared culpability of aid agencies and the Nigerian and Biafran elites in perpetuating the refugees' suffering by grouping these complicit parties together with the general descriptor, "them" (*IHB* 35).

This discursive interrogation takes on a reflexive, even metatheatrical quality when Mona challenges her fellow refugees to explain their collective silence. On the one hand, this casts the group as passively accepting the victim role written for them by both the playwright and other socio-political forces. In doing so, Acholonu arguably anticipates the discourses of silence and absence that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ("African 'Authenticity'" 53) and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (245) have employed to represent Biafra's legacies in Nigeria. While

Mona's question does provoke a physical reaction from the other refugees, causing them to look at her briefly, Mona actively subverts this restaging of their symbolic powerlessness by tearing across the stage in an eruption of anguish. This action both physically and theatrically breaks the silent tableau of the refugee camp.

For Brian Crow, such expressive staging is indicative of “the intense ‘theatricality’ of so much African theater – [...] the excitement generated by and in the theatrical event itself, characterized [...] by audiences who demand, and respond to, very direct relations with performers” (133–4). Although this general account of the dramatic arts in Africa does not capture the variety and complexity of theatrical traditions across the continent, Crow nonetheless conveys a widely held view about the form of traditional performances among populations within Nigeria.<sup>29</sup> And yet, Mona's impassioned act of performative defiance in *Into the Heart* is not sustained in the scene. The emotional toll shatters Mona's resolve, causing her to collapse from exhaustion. In response to this, one of the other women in the room observes: “Mona you break down so easily” (*IHB* 35). While the character may be able to theatrically break the silence imposed by representational frames, this scene suggests that the more difficult task lies in trying to sustain these ruptures in order to continue the urgent work of generating new artistic perspectives on the war.

Despite the fact that Mona is unable to maintain her performative fulmination in this scene, her outburst does provoke a verbal response from her fellow refugees. Later in the act, the enigmatic Old Man character tries to placate her by recommending that the way to bear such an existence is to embrace oblivion: “You have to switch off, completely, the life behind you. Pretend it never existed” (*IHB* 38). While the Old Man's desire for personal and historical anonymity reinforces the sorts of discursive silences which Mona rails against, the particular staging of the scene – casting the Old Man as the sole adult male amongst

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<sup>29</sup> As I explore later in the chapter, the Nigerian dramatist Ola Rotimi rejects the use of staging apparatuses that separate performers from their audiences. Structures such as the proscenium arch, he argues, are “alien to our traditional mode of theatre display” (“Section V, Chapter 10” para. 25).

numerous women and children – also theatrically invokes a gendered rupture in the social fabric. As with Obe’s portrayal of excessive patriarchal authority in the photographs of Gowon greeting helpless Biafran orphans in full military attire (see Figures 2 and 3), Acholonu makes the Old Man figure the representative of a crisis of masculinity in his society. When subsequently asked by Mona why he refuses to tell her his name, he replies: “I don’t want any ties and strings that will be broken the moment they are made. That’s the reason I stopped you all from calling me ‘Papa’” (*IHB* 44). Rather than overstating his masculinity as Gowon appears to do in Obe’s images, the Old Man refuses the patriarchal moniker ‘Papa’ despite the absence of another father figure. Notwithstanding these contrasts, both narratives depict the war as a destabilising and emasculating force.

Mona refuses to accept the refugees’ self-imposed anonymity in the scene, and goes on to suggest that their abnegation of social responsibility will lead to them being expunged from the history of the war:

But you must have a name. Everybody has a name. I am Mona, you all know that, yet you never mention yours, all of you. You people want to die in anonymity? Nobody will identify your graves after the war. [...] Nobody will build monuments for unknown refugees when the war is over. They will argue, how can we build a monument for those who spent the whole time hiding away from bullets and war fronts? he [*sic*] does not deserve a place in our history. There are not enough monuments to go round [*sic*] those who died fighting, least of all for those who died hiding: the eternal fugitives. (*IHB* 44–5)

In this quotation, naming and social identity are bound up with processes of memorialisation. Mona argues that to accept the moniker of the “unknown refugee” (*IHB* 44) is to allow oneself to be expunged from the historical “monuments” (44) that both sustain and politicise the legacies of war. Such an assessment of the refugees’ situation tallies with Annette Hamilton’s argument that

[t]he purpose of the monument is to memorialise. Monuments may be erected by the powerful to memorialise themselves; by the bereaved, to memorialise their departed ones whose memories otherwise will be obliterated [...]; or by the State or nation, to memorialise itself at some particular moment. (101)

Given the strong political as well as personal significances involved in modes of monumentalisation and memorialisation, Mona's warning to the unnamed refugees in *Into the Heart* does not only convey the idea that their anonymity could lead to them being forgotten by their families and societies. It also argues that they will be rendered powerless to affect the historical record. In Richard Black's assessment of the development of refugee studies, he underscores the discursive and historical sublimation of such people. Black argues that refugee studies has been "dogged by terminological difficulties" (63) because "the term simply reflects the designation of refugee enshrined in a particular Convention at a particular time" (63). The shifting legal definition of refugee status reinforces Acholonu's presentation of people displaced during the Biafran war as being both discursively and materially marooned. Black also asserts that the lack of critical clarity regarding the deeper meaning of the word 'refugee' "can contribute to the perception of the naturalness of the category of refugees and of differential policies towards those who do and those who do not qualify for the label" (63). Labelled with a political identity that is both nebulous and naturalising, refugees are trapped in a conceptual double bind.

The dramatic form of *Into the Heart* also works to resist the marginalising effects of the refugees' silence, lending physical and theatrical shape to the fugitive existence it describes. As the term 'fugitive' suggests both an evanescent figure who eludes containment (*OED*) and a form of "power operating [...] beyond the law" (Farrell 472), the combination of visual and verbal modes in theatrical staging enables the form to physically as well as rhetorically express the precariousness and potential dissidence enshrined in such an ephemeral condition. In *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016), Hillary L. Chute explores the ethical potential of such a "text-image interchange" (34), particularly in relation to the formal composition of graphic narratives or comics. Noting the "word-image hybridity" (Chute 34) of such narratives, Chute asserts – quoting the anthropologist Michael Taussig – that "this twofold, generative character of complementary

opposites expresses itself *as an act of bearing witness*" (qtd. in Chute 34, italics in original). By creatively mixing words and images, the graphic form is capable of "engag[ing] presence in active and important ways, while also leaving itself open to the provisional, partial, and disjunct" (34). The experience of reading a graphic narrative, so Chute argues, instantiates a process of witnessing through its active but also disjunctive combination of text and image. This formulation, I believe, can also be effectively applied to the dramatic form of *Into the Heart*. By seeking to stage a dialogue about the historical framing of refugees during crises such as the Biafran conflict – and by so doing exceeding the limits of both text and image – the play is inscribed with the potential to perform an ethical mode of memorialisation.

The final scene of *Into the Heart* imagines the possibility of creating a new kind of monument to people displaced by the Biafran war. Mona, who has lost all her children to the conflict and has subsequently remarried, comes face to face with her estranged husband Chume. When the self-centred Chume asks Mona why she did not wait for him, her reply enshrines the deeply fissuring impacts of the war on her life and on other refugees: "I was ruined. The Mona, [sic] that you knew is dead. I have started a new life, hoping that time with a magic wand will one day heal my wounds" (*IHB* 84). In this moment, Mona's ruin during the war – or, put another way, the destruction of the life she lived before Biafra – underwrites her new situation in its aftermath. The play's close is thus marked by an aporia whereby oppositional movements towards ideas of speculative opening and historical closure become entwined through the collapse, both material and symbolic, of the structures that formerly underpinned Mona's life and also Biafra's existence. Moreover, the climactic disintegration of historical frameworks in *Into the Heart* shows the narrative refusing to monumentalise the memory of the war in a simplistic or unitary fashion.

On the one hand, this repudiation of monumental memory could be seen as tacitly disregarding the need for public reminders of significant historical events: particularly striking given that there are, in fact, very few memorials to the war in Nigeria. On the other hand, as



Hamilton argues, through public monuments “the collective heritage of the past is encountered, in all its obscurity, by each new generation, and implanted in some form or other in the collective memory” (111). Although memorial objects become increasingly overdetermined by the changing contexts in which they function, they still enable people to interrogate and engage with their history. The memorial significance of monuments is thus always contingent, ambiguous, and multidirectional, defined by a set of overlapping dynamics that *Into the Heart* arguably expresses in theatrical form. Yet, as the play also demonstrates, the complex multidirectionality of monuments is also bound up with the possibility of their material and historical ruin.

The Nigerian author Chris Abani probes the connection between monumental structures and memories of the Biafran war in his novel *GraceLand* (2004). While the majority of the text is set several decades after the conflict and portrays the struggles of people living in and around the slums of Lagos, one passage flashes back to the warzone in Biafra. The scene in question portrays a former child soldier’s traumatic memory of walking among the ruins of a church that was the site of a deadly massacre. Although the church has been reduced to a “burned-out shell” (Abani, *GraceLand* 213), the boy soldier in question – named Innocent – observes that “[t]he fire hadn’t consumed everything” (213). One of the surviving structures is the altar “still set for mass” (Abani, *GraceLand* 214), and Innocent, who was once an altar boy, reads from an open missal that sits on the altar: “He smiled at the last line: ‘Grant us peace.’” (214). This moment among the ruins of the church’s architecture shows Innocent making an indirect plea for deliverance from the traumas he has experienced in a way comparable to Mona’s description of her ruined state in *Into the Heart*. It also provides moving context for the debilitating mental turmoil he suffers as a consequence of these harrowing memories. Indeed, in a passage set several years after the end of the war, it is revealed that Innocent has not been granted peace, but rather that “the ghosts of those he had killed [...] were tormenting him” (20). While the plot and form of Abani’s narrative are

very different to that of Acholonu's play, it is nevertheless significant that both artists have explored the linkage between ideas of structure and ruin in their creative responses to the war. Both call attention to the proleptic possibilities inscribed within mnemonic edifices – homologous to the deathly spectres woven through Obe's photographs – and work to interrogate processes of historical reinterpretation. By doing so, *Into the Heart* and *GraceLand* highlight the processes of construction and destruction that always already affect processes of memorialisation.

As the lack of public monuments to the Biafran war suggests that the Nigerian state has tried to shut down public debate about its legacies, Acholonu's play works to fill that void in the country's collective consciousness by constructing a self-critical form of performative monument to the conflict. The play's ending, therefore, offers a nuanced model of memorialisation for post-war Nigeria. It enshrines the contingent possibility that the future may hold something other than oblivion for refugees, the fugitives of this history. Abani also explores the connection between oblivion and conflict in another novel, titled *Song for Night* (2007). Set in the midst of an unnamed struggle reminiscent of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the novel is narrated by a child soldier figure named My Luck who wanders through a dense forest in search of his lost platoon. Towards the end of the narrative, My Luck arrives at a cliff edge with only darkness beyond it: "The road before me suddenly sheers away, ending abruptly in a cliff. I come to a halt on the edge and stare into an impenetrable darkness. There is something sinister about this particular darkness, as if every childhood fear I have is woven into its very fiber" (Abani, *Song for Night* 143).

While the darkness that My Luck encounters appears to enshrine the possibility that he and others caught up in the war are fated to fade from the narrative record, *Into the Heart* problematises the assumption that such people – and refugees in particular – have already succumbed to a state of oblivion. This resistant dynamic is inscribed in the very formal and representational architecture of *Into the Heart*, with modes of performative, personal and

historical ruin marking the resolution of the play. Building on this analysis, the next section turns to Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy*, which shares as well as amplifies *Into the Heart's* formfooling interrogation of the discursive construction of refugees and other fugitives of war.

### 2.3 Rethinking *Sozaboy's* rottenness

The title character of *Sozaboy* hails from the rural community of Dukana, which Ken Saro-Wiwa reveals in the novel's "Author's Note" to be a metonym for his birthplace of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta. Near the beginning of the narrative, Sozaboy becomes embroiled in an unnamed civil conflict after being lured into becoming a soldier by promises of glory and esteem. Disillusionment at the barbarity of the war soon follows, however, and after being captured and put to work by enemy forces, Sozaboy flees the army to go in search of his mother and his wife Agnes. At the end of the narrative, Sozaboy returns to Dukana to discover that his family have been killed and that the traumatised community now considers him to be a malignant spectre. Stripped of his cultural identity, he flees his home as a fugitive of war:

I walked quickly from my own town Dukana and in fact I did not know where I was going. [...]

And I was thinking how I was prouiding before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely. (*Sozaboy* 181)

Although *Sozaboy* could be seen to function as a kind of textual monument to the war in the style of *Into the Heart* – inscribing a narrative of Biafra within the public cultural sphere – this quotation illustrates the way that both the form and plot of the novel subvert the representational foundations of Biafra's portrayal and reception. Firstly, the quotation embodies the novel's 'rotten' linguistic aesthetic, evinced through the deployment of the verb "prouiding" (*Sozaboy* 181) as an embellishment of the adjective 'proud' and "soza" (181) as a corrupted truncation of 'soldier'. Saro-Wiwa offers a definition of the novel's idiosyncratic

style in the “Author’s Note”, asserting that the language of the text is “a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English” (para. 4). The striking manipulation of language in *Sozaboy* has preoccupied critics. Harry Garuba, for one, contends that Saro-Wiwa renders ‘standard’ English incapable of portraying Sozaboy’s world in order to unmask hegemonic power structures and unlock a subversive logic of minority discourse (28). Another, Michael North, argues that the author’s English experiment proposes a new syncretic vision of Nigeria that overcomes the country’s deep ethno-linguistic divisions (108).

Such interpretations of the subversive language of *Sozaboy* reinforce this chapter’s argument that artistic interpretations of the Biafran war work to break out of and reimagine the representational frameworks that have tried to contain them. However, both Garuba and North read Saro-Wiwa’s text as a primarily political-discursive project, and fail to account for its negotiation of the precarious existences of those displaced by the war. Indeed, unlike *Into the Heart*, the fugitive condition inscribed at the close of the novel does not appear to open up a space for a hopeful or productive reformulation of Sozaboy’s life and story. Instead, the stalling repetition of the phrase “run and run” (*Sozaboy* 181), and the rotten reimagining of the conventions of the epistolary form – “Believe me yours sincerely” (181) – seem to structurally foreclose the possibility of further mediation. In this way, both the protagonist and the reader appear to be trapped in a representational and interpretive abyss. Emily Apter’s interpretation of the language of *Sozaboy* goes some way to theorise this haunting dénouement:

[R]otten English figures death and spectrality within the rhetoric of grammatical incorrectness. The lapse of good grammar becomes a mechanism for representing ghostly aporias, double-entendres, and mimetic effects. Rotten English, in this sense, is English in a minor key – strange and sad – an off-kilter English that ‘translates’ political trauma into linguistic mourning. (147)

Apter builds on and reframes Garuba’s account of the minority logic in *Sozaboy* by casting Saro-Wiwa’s rotten English as a formal and grammatical translator that imperfectly mediates

between the deathly violence produced by the conflict and its textual representation. Moreover, her argument resonates with Stephen Clingman's conceptualisation of identity – particularly its expression in transnational fiction – as a transitive grammar. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Clingman posits that “[t]he self is [...] capable of many phases, possibilities, connected elements, both within itself and in relation to others, in time as well as space. The syntax of the self – its combinatory, unfolding possibilities – is a transitive syntax. It is a function of, and permits, *navigation*” (16). This notion of a navigatory and transitive syntax of the self tallies with Apter's reading of rotten grammar in *Sozaboy* as a vital medium for different kinds of translation.

Apter may be able to reconcile *Sozaboy*'s fugitive and figurative spectrality at the end of the novel, but her argument overlooks the text's engagement with the embodied experiences of refugees by reading its portrayal of “political trauma” (147) too strictly through the lens of Nigeria's post-war cultural militarisation (145). By focusing so strongly on the spectral traces of bodies and words, Apter's argument overlooks the material impact of the conflict on lives affected by it. In doing so, it fails to explore alternative routes of representation and interpretation that this materiality might inscribe. I want to trace and recover the embodied traces of refugees inscribed within the text; to shed new light on the formfooling aesthetic that runs through Saro-Wiwa's Biafran narrative and other artistic responses to the war.

## 2.4 Re-visions of the refugee

In the novel's antepenultimate chapter, *Sozaboy* travels to a number of refugee camps looking for his lost mother and wife. In the opening paragraph, the titular narrator tries to describe what he sees in the camps:

My dear brothers and sisters, I will not try to tell you how I was moving from one camp to another. Or what I saw in camps that I went to. Because [...] this camp is proper human compost pit and all these people they are calling refugees are actually people that they have throway like rubbish. Nothing that you can use them for. They

have nothing in this world. [...] All their children have big big belly like pregnant woman. And if you see their eyes and legs. Just like something inside cinema[.] (*Sozaboy* 148)

This passage portrays the damaging effects of the war by refracting it through an intricate array of material, formal and metatextual lenses. The opening epistolary gesture to the reader – “My dear brothers and sisters” (*Sozaboy* 148) – frames the narrator-protagonist’s textual portrayal of the refugees as a precarious process of collective witnessing. Sozaboy initially states that he will not try, and indeed feels unable, to transcribe his perception of those vulnerable, discarded people into text. This abnegation of authorial responsibility is then both justified and undercut by Sozaboy’s subsequent description of the camp as a “human compost pit” (*Sozaboy* 148). The narrator is able to textually render the refugee experience by delineating the broader material and metaphorical spaces that they are framed and contained by: a human rubbish dump for those populations whom the dominant power structures have labelled ‘refugee’ and thus can “throwaway like rubbish” (*Sozaboy* 148). The camp represents, then, a frame of apprehension that also expresses oppressive and violent functions.

Achille Mbembe theorises the forced separation of populations into spatial and political zones of necropolitical control by employing the term “war machines” (32), which he defines as polymorphous and diffuse armed groups that constantly change allegiance and shift in purpose (32). Mbembe further asserts that these war machines flourished in Africa with the erosion of state authority during the latter part of the twentieth century (33). This configuration echoes and perhaps confirms Frantz Fanon’s warning in *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in French in 1961) that the liberation of people from colonial oppression could be undermined by the “spoilt children of yesterday’s colonialism and today’s national governments, [who] organize the loot of whatever national resource exists” (48). War machines, which are a product of the corrupted form of decolonisation Fanon perceives, function by using a combination of brutal force and political categorisation

(employing terms like ‘refugee’ and ‘rebel’) to incapacitate populations and confine them to physical and discursive “zones of exception” (34).

Mbembe’s theorisation of the refugee camp as an exceptional and delimited zone resonates with Butler’s assertion that frames of apprehension and representation “not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject” (3). However, Mbembe’s work corresponds more closely with Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the camp “as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)” (123). Building on Michel Foucault’s account of biopolitics – a term which defines “the growing inclusion of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power” (Agamben 119) – Agamben conceives of the camp as “a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order [...]. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense of the term ‘exception’ (*ex-capere*), *taken outside*, included through its own exclusion” (169–70, italics in original). Sozaboy’s initial portrayal of the camp as a human compost pit renders it as just the sort of zone of exception that Mbembe and Agamben formulate.

Such theorisations of the reductive and dehumanising portrayal of the refugee experience also feed into debates about the media’s predilection – particularly in the global north – for depictions of mass suffering and ‘poverty porn’. As Caroline Lenette and Sienna Cleland argue, while the circulation of images of impoverished and identifiably foreign “children in need” (78) can “elicit sympathy on the part of western viewers, it also means that such depictions allow viewers to comfortably imagine poverty as an offshore, distant hardship” (78). Such emotional and psycho-geographical distancing – which Lenette and Cleland further contend leads to the reinforcement of racist stereotypes in the global north about the supposedly primitive ‘other’ (78) – represents another facet of the political zones of exception Mbembe theorises. Indeed, it suggests that readers and other constituencies of cultural consumers – both proximate and distant – are also complicit in these processes. The

narrative of *Sozaboy* thus draws attention to such readerly acts of prejudicial demarcation and dehumanisation through its depiction of refugee camps. All this serves to complicate readings of Saro-Wiwa's portrayal of Biafran war refugees, especially given that it was first published in the United Kingdom and has circulated internationally. Indeed, it could be argued that the story of *Sozaboy* feeds into certain negative, and distancing, stereotypes about African refugee crises for a substantial foreign readership.

While Saro-Wiwa does draw from these frameworks in order to give his narrator a vocabulary with which to depict the refugees, I would argue that he also reflexively challenges their reductive and distancing powers by foregrounding the embodied nature of the refugee's experience and representation. Although the war has left the refugees with "nothing in this world" (*Sozaboy* 148), Sozaboy's narrative voice refuses to compound this denuded state by allowing their suffering to be expunged from or glossed over in the text. Instead, he emphasises the terrible but manifestly physical effects of kwashiorkor – a severe form of malnutrition – which has given the children "big big belly like pregnant woman" (148). Thus, by drawing attention to the refugees' suffering bodies rather than ignoring or sanitising them, the novel disrupts the processes of abstraction and confinement crucial to the rendering of refugee camps as zones of exception, even as it invokes those discursive operations.

Furthermore, by coupling the children's diseased bodies with the image of the life-giving pregnant woman, the narrative voice conjures a grotesque comparison for the reader, one which disrupts the 'poverty porn' framework that works to anaesthetise such suffering for audiences. Thus, the narrative assertion of the refugees' materiality works to exceed and disrupt the zones of control that try to contain and disaggregate them. In their theoretical analyses, Gil Z. Hochberg and Butler make cognate observations about the framing of war and disaster. They both contend that frames of violence can blind readers to the lives and experiences of certain people, and suggest that cultural representations of precarious lives must offer alternative configurations or "re-visions" (Hochberg 34) of those frameworks.



This reframing helps audiences to perceive the occluding frame (Butler, *Frames of War* 100), and to render more complex their political realities (Hochberg 34). The final sentence of the *Sozaboy* refugee camp quotation reproduced above fulfils this re-visioning function by transposing embodied excess into the realm of “cinema” (148). This multimedia gesture has the effect of expanding the generative force of Saro-Wiwa’s rotten English into a broader aesthetic of representational and subjective excess.

The interrogative political-aesthetic project of formfooling engaged in by the Biafran war narratives of Saro-Wiwa, Acholonu and Obe resonates with Chute’s assessment of the formal structures of the comics genre. Chute uses the plural word ‘comics’ to denote a singular concept throughout the book’s analysis. This usage enables Chute to distinguish between the simplistic idea of the comic book as a product created for popular consumption, and comics as a specific and multivalent representational form. Chute defines comics as “a visual-verbal narrative documentary form, one that, significantly, is also a print form, trafficking in the presentation of the stationary framed image” (14). The term thus conveys the form’s multimodal aesthetic and materiality, and she argues that this graphic form does the work of “[m]aterializing’ history” (27):

[T]he work of marks on the page creates it as space and substance, gives it a corporeality, a physical shape – like a suit, perhaps, for an absent body, or to make evident the kind of space-time many bodies move in and move through; to make, in other words, the twisting lines of history legible through form. (Chute 27)

All the artists under consideration in this chapter use their work to embody and make legible the often-invisible ways that representational frames of Biafra have been manipulated for particular purposes. Indeed, this process undergirds the very formal foundations of the war’s messy and still contested legacies. Yet, as Chute also emphasises, the formal shaping of history is not a static phenomenon. Rather, it is a shifting process that illustrates the particular “space-time” (27) which bodies, representations and readers inhabit. This notion of ‘space-time’ recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorisation of the chronotope, which expresses “the intrinsic

connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Bakhtin views the chronotope as “a formally constitutive category of literature” (84) with intrinsic generic and structural significances.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while Chute asserts that it is the specific aesthetic, structural and interpretive mechanics of the comics genre that makes “the twisting lines of history legible through form” (27), this reading is arguably indebted to Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope, which works to define a “work’s artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality” (243). This spatio-temporal conceptualisation of a literary text’s structure and meaning has a deeper significance, however. As Bakhtin contends, a narrative’s chronotope also “contains within it an evaluating aspect that can be isolated from the whole” (Bakhtin 243). This clarification resonates with a crucial aspect of Chute’s analysis of comics: namely, that the form possesses a uniquely self-interrogating artificiality (17).

The artifice of comics, so Chute suggests, lends the genre greater reflexive force than other representational forms, especially in the way it portrays wars (16–7). As Chute reveals, her “interest in comics is motivated in part by how these works push on conceptions of the unrepresentable and the unimaginable that have become commonplace in discourse about trauma” (17). While it would be problematic to uncritically apply Chute’s theorisation of this particular form to the artistic responses explored in this chapter, I nevertheless suggest that her thesis offers a productive framework for drawing out the deeper processes of aesthetic innovation and chronotopic interplay in selective Biafran arts. Using Chute’s theory to support my analysis, the following sections demonstrate that the formfooling aesthetic expressed by these artworks involves the imaginative projection and disruptive mediation of

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<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope has not only been used to illuminate works of literature, but has also helped to work through the worldly dynamics at play in the development of the fields of ethnography and anthropology, which are both rooted in the colonial enterprise. As James Clifford puts it in a study of the impact of Western ethnography on understandings of “non-Western peoples and things” (236), “[o]ne cannot realistically situate historical detail – putting something ‘in its time’ – without appealing to explicit or implicit chronotopes” (236).

the formal frames that delimit artistic portrayals of the war. Indeed, I argue that it instantiates a reflexive interrogation of the very interpretive perspectives that artists as well as readers inhabit.

## 2.5 Formfooling as an artificial and enigmatic process

Returning to Garuba's discussion of the minority discursive logic in *Sozaboy*, he further argues that the power struggles embodied by Saro-Wiwa's rotten English open up a rift in the formal fabric of the text: "The struggle for linguistic control within the text extends to the very act of writing itself. Even though the novel is a written text, *Sozaboy*, the narrator, consistently employs *speakerly* strategies to point at the oral nature of his narrative" (Garuba, "Minority Discourse" 29, italics in original). Garuba identifies a formal tension that runs through *Sozaboy*: a creative counterforce that pulls between the narrative's textual architecture and its vernacular style. This rupture in *Sozaboy*'s formal framework renders it as constructed and precarious, and thus casts formfooling as more than just a force that subverts representational structures at the level of the word or image. Indeed, this section serves to explore the ways the war narratives of Saro-Wiwa, Acholonu and Obe blur the distinctions between forms in order to imagine new and challenging possibilities for the creative legacies of Biafra.

While both Saro-Wiwa's and Acholonu's narratives offer subversive reworkings of the frameworks that have been used to represent the war, they do so from within the material bounds of a single creative medium: the printed text and the physical performance respectively. Obe's photographic portrayal of the war, by contrast, places subtitles next to photographs, and thus explicitly juxtaposes different kinds of representational media. Indeed, one particular photograph (see Figure 4) illustrates the destabilising effects of this combination of text and image.

Fig. 4. Peter Obe, *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 192. Figure reproduced in Volume 11 of the thesis.

Although this photograph is similar to the pictorial representations of Biafran children analysed earlier in the chapter (see Figures 2 and 3), it differs from those other photographs in several key respects. Firstly, it falls earlier in the narrative in a section titled “Rehabilitation”. This suggests a more direct engagement with the destructive and wounding impact of the war than the concluding section, which portrays a celebratory scene of reunification through the depiction of repatriated evacuee children. Secondly, the portrayal of the boy’s naked form draws a more explicit parallel between it and the iconic images of Biafran refugees than the smartly dressed children presented in the later images. While the interaction between the child and the military official in Figure 4 demonstrates unequal power relations akin to those expressed in Figures 2 and 3, the infant’s denuded body renders him more pitiable and helpless than those other children.

In one sense, the vulnerability captured in Figure 4 fits the narrative of robust Nigerian paternalism as a conciliatory response to Biafra's destruction. The Biafran people may have been left destitute by the war, but the Nigerian state is on hand to raise them up from their defeated state. Yet the qualitative distance between the photograph and the subtitle that abuts it produces a representational ambiguity that threatens to rip a fault line through this unifying message. On the one hand, the caption "Airforce Lt. Col. Ogunro taking care of a refugee in Lagos" (Obe 192) reflects the idea that the officer is caring for the child in a reunified Nigeria. On the other, the jarring juxtaposition of the small child bearing a fearful expression with the group of imposing men in military attire opens up a subversive fissure in this conciliatory interpretation of the text-image relationship.

The child's distressed reaction not only calls into question the broader political narrative of the "Rehabilitation" section, but it also imbues the idea of 'taking care of a refugee' with retributive, even deadly intimations. Indeed, to take care of someone does not always mean to treat them well, but can also denote sinister intent. By probing the spaces between forms in this way, Obe uses his images to add layers of signifying complexity to the narrative of the war and its aftermath. Chute theorises the effects of this phenomenon by asserting that "[a] textured subjectivity emerges in the space of the relationship of caption to image" (8). The material and conceptual interstices that Obe places between the image of the Biafran child and its textual companion thus destabilise and disrupt their interpretive correspondence, and allow alternative readings to be generated.

Chute goes on to make a deeper claim about the aesthetic and ethical repercussions of this textured subjectivity and artificial materiality. She contends:

if comics is a form about presence, it is also stippled with erasure – in the interruption provided by the ambiguous spaces of the gutter [...]. Movingly, unflinchingly, comics works to document, display, furnish. They engage the difficulty of spectacle instead of turning away from it. They risk representation. (17)

This rich interpretation of the workings of comics helps to clarify my analysis of the Biafran war arts in this chapter. Chute casts the self-consciously artificial mechanics of the form, which involve a disruptive combination of presences and absences, as being bound up with the work of representing the spectacle of violence. Specifically, Chute focuses on the significance of the gutter, the “*constitutive* absence” (35, italics in original) that sits between the different frames of a graphic narrative. The gutter is the space “where a reader, conventionally, projects causality, and where the division of time in comics is marked” (35). As a structural lack built into comics, the gutter works to foreground and materialise the role of reader in constructing the narrative.

This formal structure also instantiates a degree of representational and interpretive risk in the comics genre, requiring the artist to surrender some artistic control over the meanings inscribed within and expressed by their works. Such risk, while significant for the composition and reception of comics, takes on a palpably political edge for artists interrogating the legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Indeed, a long line of creative figures – from Saro-Wiwa and Abani to Wole Soyinka and Fela Kuti – have been imprisoned for publicly intervening in these thorny debates. Although I have found no evidence to suggest that Obe or Acholonu suffered similar treatment, it is important to remember that Gowon’s military government sanctioned Obe’s narrative of the war, and that Acholonu’s play does not appear to have been widely performed or publicised. Indeed, I would argue that Obe’s complex mediation of different forms and narrative frames in *Nigeria: A decade in crises* still involves considerable political risks, even if it did not provoke the ire of the state. I will return to the question of risk later in the chapter, but for now, I turn to the deeper, reflexive facets of formfooling in the Biafran war narratives of Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa.

During the refugee camp scene in Acholonu’s *Into the Heart*, Mona’s resistance to the Old Man’s desire for historical anonymity and oblivion precipitates a meta-theatrical exploration of the socio-political inequalities laid bare by the war. When asked whether he

thinks the children of Biafra will ever live in harmony, he responds with an excoriating attack on the corrupt and egotistical elites who “enslave the masses they are supposed to protect” (IHB 49). The corresponding stage direction indicates that the actor playing the part is “*beginning to pace the room*” (49, italics in original). Despite the Old Man’s earlier passivity, which represented the physical embodiment of his abdication of social responsibility, in this part of the scene he offers an active rejoinder to the oppression of “[t]he silent majority” (IHB 49). Moving restlessly across the stage as he speaks, the character physically resists the restrictive frames used by the powerful to silence refugees of the war.<sup>31</sup> This dramatic response to the suppression of the masses not only probes the fissures between the entwined presences and absences that mediate Biafra’s representational legacies. It also draws out a tension within the theatrical form itself.

The audience, watching from beyond the stage, represents another sort of silent majority whose reception of the war narrative is manipulated by the creative authority and political whims of the playwright, actors and director. The play therefore draws attention to and challenges the audience’s passive position in relation to the performance. In this way, it could be seen to fulfil Bertolt Brecht’s proclamation that “the theatre must provoke with its representations of human social life. It must amaze its public, and this can be achieved by a technique of alienating the familiar” (238). For Brecht, this process of alienation enables the theatrical medium to produce a form of “dialectical materialism” (238), which both traces out the inconsistencies inherent in social situations and enables the audience “to look at what takes place in such a way as to be able to affect it” (240). Acholonu arguably invokes this method of audience engagement in *Into the Heart*, reinforcing the power of its socio-political critique.

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<sup>31</sup> Acholonu also explores the connection between silence and the portrayal of Biafran refugees in the poem “Concentration Camp” (*Nigeria in the Year 1999* 28–9). Towards the end of the poem, Acholonu affirms that “a folk is being annihilated / and the world looks on / we have screamed / but they pretended / not to hear / and now we have gone quiet / resigned to our bleak fate” (*Nigeria in the Year 1999* 29).

Such a Brechtian exploration of the spectator's viewpoint takes on a more complex significance when it is placed in the context of Nigerian theatrical history. Ola Rotimi, another important Nigerian playwright, argues against the artificial separation of actors and audience during the performance of a play. In an interview with Effio B. Uwatt from 1985 – the same year that Acholonu's play and *Sozaboy* were published – Rotimi asserts that the proscenium stage format was imposed on Nigerian theatre during the colonial period, producing what he provocatively describes as a “technical apartheid” (“Section V, Chapter 10” para. 25).<sup>32</sup> This ‘Western’ performance form, Rotimi suggests, is alien to the traditional modes of theatrical display in Nigeria and Africa more broadly, where “actors and spectators are commingled in a shared, communal experience” (“Section V, Chapter 10” para. 25). Crow supports this view in his analysis of African theatre. He asserts that the best performers “are highly energized and remarkably skillful [*sic*] stimulators and manipulators of audience response” (Crow 134). Acholonu does not reveal the kind of theatrical space she intends the play to be performed in, and as I will explore later in the chapter, I have been unable to find any evidence of the play ever having been staged. However, the script's engagement with the idea of the silenced masses suggests that the writer wants to inscribe a degree of separation between the performers and the audience. Indeed, the reflexive theatrical space conjured by Acholonu's play could also be seen to represent a performative version of the exceptional biopolitical zones theorised by Mbembe and Agamben. It instantiates a subversive *stage* of exception where narrative as well as interpretive frames of the Biafran war can be interrogated and formfooled.

By contrast, the reflexive form manifested in *Sozaboy* is inscribed with a more cinematic inflection. The reference to filmic processes in the narrator's description of refugee infants – who are portrayed as being “like something inside cinema” (*Sozaboy* 148) – offers

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<sup>32</sup> The interview is published in *Playwriting and Directing in Nigeria: Interviews with Ola Rotimi* (2002).



an enigmatic reappraisal of the war's historic representation through different media forms. Assessing the work of the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, Marilyn Fabe argues that Eisenstein's pioneering use of the montage film technique reflects his belief that "proper film continuity should not proceed smoothly, but through a series of shocks. Wherever possible, he tried to create some kind of visual conflict or discontinuity between two shots, with the goal of creating a jolt in the spectator's psyche" (27). *Sozaboy*'s enigmatic employment of a reference to cinema – for the purposes of portraying the refugee experience – enacts such a disruptive process by embedding a filmic resonance in the textual narrative without clarifying its significance.

The cinematic function inscribed within the war novel can also be seen to engage with the historic roles played by conflict and film in articulating aspects of modernity in the twentieth century. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres contends, "[i]n the modern world, space is mapped as a battlefield principally through colonialism, race, and dehumanizing ways of differentiating genders" (4). While this argument is suggestive in the context of Saro-Wiwa's creative portrayal of the Biafran war – which was a period when such 'modern' issues as colonialism, race and gender intersected and erupted – *Sozaboy* does not simply note the existence of this "paradigm of war" (Maldonado-Torres 3). The instance of filmic shock woven into the text also shows the novel interrogating this preoccupation of modernity. Such a reading resonates with Francesco Casetti's assertion that the twentieth century was "[f]ramed by the eye of the cinema, [and that] the forces and counterforces of modernity changed their orientation and their inflection [as a consequence]. Film 'rewrote' its epoch in order to answer the question of its time" (4). Crucially, Casetti uses a reference to the written form here to explain the reflexive significance of film, further illustrating the significance and salience of Saro-Wiwa's enigmatic blurring of formal boundaries in his creative investigation into twentieth-century conflicts.

I describe this process of multimodal inscription and interrogation as enigmatic because it arises unexpectedly in the narrative and is left unexplained, creating an indeterminate dissonance in the story that resonates with Barthes' definition of the filmic:

The filmic, then, lies [...] in that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximate and where another language begins [...]. The third meaning – theoretically locatable but not describable – can now be seen as the *passage* from language to *significance* and the founding act of the filmic itself. (*Image Music Text* 65, italics in original)

This nebulous notion of the filmic, which Barthes argues very few films evoke, represents an open-ended oscillation between communicative registers or signs and the more symbolic work of signification. Such a theorisation also corresponds with Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts. Unlike readerly texts, which “are products (and not productions) [that] make up the enormous mass of our literature” (Barthes, *S/Z* 5) and are “produced according to the law of the Signified” (8), the writerly text “is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (5).

Barthes' formulation of the enigmatic quality of the filmic overlaps strikingly with his definition of the writerly text, and this has significant implications for my reading of the refugee scene in *Sozaboy*. Indeed, it suggests that the novel's rotten textual representation of the precarity of refugees is further mediated by the seemingly obscure invocation of the filmic. This interpretation suggests that Sozaboy's gesture to the processual mode of cinema has destabilising and formfooling potential, opening up a space in the text where obscure but forceful meanings can be generated. Developing this analysis, I now consider Saro-Wiwa's broader impact on Biafra's creative reception and on Nigeria's cultural sphere.

## 2.6 Projecting filmic mediations beyond the frame

Before Saro-Wiwa's unlawful execution by Nigeria's authoritarian military government in 1995, he was best-known in the country as a satirist. His television series *Basi & Company*,

which lampooned Nigerian society and politics, was particularly popular (Lock 12). This alternative cultural enterprise demonstrates Saro-Wiwa's expertise in utilising visual forms to express his creative and political sensibilities. As Rob Nixon puts it, "Saro-Wiwa was alert to shifts in audience and occasion, locally and internationally; he would adjust his register and focus accordingly" (109).<sup>33</sup> Saro-Wiwa's "generic versatility" (Nixon 109) also helps elucidate the wider significance of *Sozaboy* for the artistic legacies of Biafra. For instance, Uzodinma Iweala's war novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) – set in an unnamed African country blighted by internecine conflict – is written in a form of broken English that resonates with Saro-Wiwa's earlier work. Moreover, Iweala's novel has since been adapted into an award-winning film by the writer and director Cary Joji Fukunaga.<sup>34</sup> While I am not suggesting that *Sozaboy* directly facilitated this later filmic adaptation, I do think that the projection and mediation of different representational forms in *Sozaboy* opens up a space for just this kind of narrative transformation. Indeed, while no cinematic interpretation of Saro-Wiwa's rotten aesthetic has ever been attempted – and its transitive textual form would resist easy translation despite its construction through filmic processes – the flowering of the Nollywood film industry since the 1990s has been facilitated by the use of just this kind of 'broken' media.

As I noted in the introduction, the artist Zina Saro-Wiwa – who is Ken's daughter – writes compellingly about the development and style of this cultural phenomenon. She argues that "[t]hese films occupy an intriguingly ambiguous realm that is between self-consciousness and naivety[, b]etween the hyper real and the totally unrealistic" (24). This analysis proposes that the formfooling and rotten linguistic effects embodied in *Sozaboy* can be transposed through other forms; especially by those that flourished in Nigeria's precarious post-war paradigm. Z. Saro-Wiwa goes on to underscore the cultural and political vitality of

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Saro-Wiwa's varied Biafran war writings, see my article "We all stand before history': (Re)Locating Saro-Wiwa in the Biafran War Canon" (2017).

<sup>34</sup> The 2015 film won the Marcello Mastroianni Award at the 72<sup>nd</sup> Venice International Film Festival (De Marco para. 6).

the Nollywood industry within postcolonial Africa: “For all its failings, this industry provides a vision of Nigeria and Africa that has been wrested from the ideologies of foreign bodies and distributors that want to impose their own vision of Africa” (25). Linking this account of Nollywood’s vibrancy to the work of artists such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, it becomes clear that by responding reflexively to Nigeria’s history through modes of aesthetic experimentation, they produce subversive monuments to the country’s complex chronotopes.

The layering of different forms within the narrative theatre of *Sozaboy* also intersects with filmic elements expressed in both Obe’s and Acholonu’s works. On the one hand, by collating and narrativising a series of ‘stills’ captured from the war, Obe’s *Nigeria: A decade of crises* utilises an important facet of the filmic form. On the other hand, ideas of the photographic and filmic ‘still’ are also at work in Acholonu’s play. Indeed, as Ola Rotimi conceptualises, Nigerian theatrical audiences can be viewed as ‘polaroid’ because they offer instant responses to the action on stage: reactions that intervene in and materially break up the continuity of the plot (“Section V, Chapter 10” para. 25). While Rotimi does not explicitly state which form of staging should be used to produce this effect, it could be argued that the alienating proscenium stage would productively reinforce this ‘polaroid’ experience. By confronting the audience with the artifice of the performance and the harsh spectacle of war, plays such as *Into the Heart* provoke alternative and reflexive responses to those produced in a ‘traditional’ theatrical setting. Acholonu’s play text is thus inscribed, like Obe’s, with a form of polaroid potential that constantly threatens to fragment its narrative cohesion.

In terms of the relationship between the photographic and the filmic, Barthes interrogates the connection in his elucidation of the interpretive potential of the film ‘still’. He argues that “[t]he still is a fragment of a second text *whose existence never exceeds the fragment*; film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is *on top of* the other or that one is *extracted* from the other” (Barthes, *Image Music Text* 67, italics in original). This innovative function of the still, which gestures towards and intersects

with the filmic without ever exceeding it, offers an optic through which to perceive the knotted tissue of formal connections and dissonances that cut across the Biafran war narratives of Obe, Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa. Indeed, their works project a revitalising but complex cultural imaginary, producing formfooling aesthetic processes that provoke formal structures and narrative contents to bleed into one another. While Obe's photographic work utilises the artifice of the gutter in order to produce these effects, Acholonu's play and Saro-Wiwa's novel also instantiate forms of reflexive structural absence. As *Into the Heart* negotiates the silences around Biafra, drawing attention to the artificial theatrical structures that alienate but also involve audiences in the narrative's portrayal of the war, so *Sozaboy* strains against its textual fabric, employing enigmatic references to filmic media to open up generative spaces in its narrative form. As such, they demonstrate both the risks and potential gains involved in such highly mediated, meta-aesthetic and precarious work. Their narratives not only probe the limits of their formal construction; they also interrogate the positionality and complicity of the artist as a conduit for modes of cultural expression.

## **2.7 Reflexivity and risk: Interrogating the role of the artist**

Obe's narrative expresses a reflexive authorial function in an explicit way. In one section of *Nigeria: A decade of crises*, the photographer inserts a series of images that place him within the narrative frame. By doing so, he turns the fixing gaze of the camera back on the artist and on the spectator as well. This self-referential reflex is captured in Figure 5, an image that depicts Obe showing his camera to General Gowon.

Fig. 5. Peter Obe, *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 177. Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

By drawing attention to his role in the production of the narrative in this image, Obe risks his artistic authority. On the one hand, the photograph tacitly confirms that the Nigerian elite has an influence over the composition of his narrative of Biafra. On the other hand, Obe also appears to surrender the power of image production to another, unknown photographer. The identity of this phantom presence is suggested in Figure 6, an image that shows Obe turning the mechanics of representation – and his own gaze – back towards the spectator.

Fig. 6. Peter Obe, *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 178. Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

In this way, Obe inverts the author-subject relationship established at the beginning of the narrative, placing the spectator in a position of authorial and interpretive dominance. Thus, in a work depicting a decade of Nigerian crises, Obe reflexively renders himself and the reader as potentially complicit in the authoring of those calamities, which turns his narrative into the kind of inscrutable writerly text that Barthes proposes. Furthermore, the sheer aesthetic depth expressed by Obe's images supports the artist and critic Olu Oguibe's view that even though the photographer is popular among the political establishment, he "approached every photographic moment with the weight of his technical and visual sophistication regardless of its ultimate utility" (77). So, while Obe's narrative offers a biased and distinctly pro-Nigerian view of the war on one level, the complexity of the individual images nuances this partial position overall.

In subtler ways than Obe's self-referential photographs, Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa also turn the witnessing gaze back on themselves and the art forms they utilise. For instance, the countless moments of direct address in the quasi-epistolary narrative of *Sozaboy* show the text repeatedly gesturing out to the reader in a process of interpellation. The literary critic Elleke Boehmer adapts Louis Althusser's definition of interpellation to explore the way different forms of reading are negotiated in postcolonial novels. In Boehmer's reading, interpellation describes "the ways in which ideology is 'called up' in a society, through the functioning of educational, legal, cultural, and other structures" ("Differential Publics" 13). Using this notion of interpellation as a process of 'calling up', Boehmer considers "how the postcolonial reader is invited by or invoked within a text, either as a character, or through the text, as its reader. For example, we might ask what kinds of readers or addressees, and what kinds of audience or public, these scenes of reading call up[?]" ("Differential Publics" 13). *Sozaboy* arguably participates in such a process of textual interpellation. As noted earlier, the novel ends with the narrator remarking "[b]elieve me yours sincerely" (*Sozaboy* 181),

which invokes as well as plays with the conventions of the epistolary form by pleading with the reader to trust his narrative despite its broken form.

Yet the formal self-referentiality that runs through this work is underpinned by a deeper interrogation of the processes and risks involved in artistic representation. In the “Author’s Note” to *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa traces the evolution of the novel’s rotten textual-linguistic aesthetic. The writer reveals that he first employed the style in a short story composed during his university days, and further suggests that he was inspired to write a longer narrative in rotten English when a teacher “doubted that it could be sustained in a novel” (*Sozaboy*, “Author’s Note” para. 1). The overall artistic success and merit of the narrative, so he declares, “is my experiment” (*Sozaboy*, “Author’s Note” para. 5). This paratextual material has the effect of framing *Sozaboy* as a fiction constantly struggling against the possibility of its failure.

Such a creative dynamic is also haunted by Saro-Wiwa’s involvement in the war. Indeed, while Obe was employed by the Nigerian state to visually document the war, Saro-Wiwa held official positions in the federalist government of the Niger Delta area – which had formed part of the original Biafran territory – during this period. As the writer reveals in his memoir *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (1989), he worked as “Administrator for Bonny and later as Commissioner and member of the Executive Council for Rivers State[, which] brought [him] into contact with [...] the military, bureaucrats and politicians” (Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain* 9). Saro-Wiwa is quick to add that his “official positions were minor and did not give [him] access to any of the inner workings of the Federal Authorities” (*On a Darkling Plain* 9), but he also tries to legitimise his writings by underscoring that he was “one of the very few Nigerians who were privileged to be close to the events of the crisis” (10). This suggests that both his creative and non-fictional responses to the conflict are driven by a reflexive impulse to account for his complicity in the Nigerian war effort: a decision that exposes him to potential criticism even as it works to justify his



interventions. Such an inscription of artistic risk is also negotiated in Acholonu's Biafra drama, although with contrasting effects.

As illustrated above, *Into the Heart* offers a nuanced response to Biafra that reflexively questions the role of the audience in the theatrical performance of the war. Yet despite this striking narrative, the play has received next to no critical attention. Although this is partly explained by the fact that Acholonu is better known as a poet and scholar than as a dramatist (Maduakor 75), it may also be because there is no clear evidence that *Into the Heart* has ever been performed in Nigeria or elsewhere. Indeed, while it is plausible that the paucity of scholarly work on Acholonu's plays reflects the lack of performance history, this absence also draws attention to the risks involved in trying to theatrically restage the divisive history of Biafra.

Better known playwrights such as Rotimi and Zulu Sofola – who was the first female playwright to have her work published in Nigeria (Akinwale 68) – have only indirectly engaged with the war in their plays, using heavily veiled historical allegories as a stand-in for the conflict.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, even Soyinka's most overt dramatic response to the war, *Madmen and Specialists* – first performed at the University of Ibadan in March 1971 (*Collected Plays: Volume 2* 216) – never mentions the word 'Biafra'. In contrast to these evasive tactics, *Into the Heart's* explicit engagement with the conflict self-consciously restages its destructive effects, offering a direct intervention in Biafra's legacies even though more renowned playwrights have eschewed such an unambiguous approach. The risk may not have paid off for Acholonu's career as a dramatist, but it nevertheless shows her using her work to boldly question the role of theatre in mediating the conflict.

The various forms of authorial interrogation enshrined in the narratives of Obe, Saro-Wiwa and Acholonu also express an ethical imperative that runs through the Biafran

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<sup>35</sup> For example, while Sofola's *King Emene: Tragedy of a Rebellion* (1974) and Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968) both explore political issues resonant of the Biafran crisis, they are both set in pre-colonial times.

arts. A striking example of this can be found in the poetry of Odia Ofeimun. In “The Poet Lied”, a verse first published in a collection of the same title in 1980, Ofeimun accuses poets of failing to meaningfully respond to the war:

[...]  
 Where his heart should burst  
 his words were merely correct and sane,  
 the envy of the gazette-compilers  
 lacking the energy, the human inflexion to exhume  
 from their shallow makeshift graves  
 the memory of those lost  
 in paths of rain and ruin

And because he tried to change  
 the exuberant colours of life  
 into sallow marks, relieving death  
 of its hurt, its significance,  
 the poet lied, he lied hard. (Ofeimun 43–4)

A critical tension between form and content courses through these stanzas. On one level, the verse emphasises the bland insipidness of earlier Biafran war poetry, describing it as the kind of “shallow” (Ofeimun 43) and “sallow” (44) work that journalists pride themselves on. However, on another level, the repeated use of enjambment, which extends many of the poem’s clauses beyond the end of the line, inscribes a structural urgency within the work that contrasts with the supposedly feeble verse of other writers. Indeed, the poem as a whole works to invoke a “human inflexion” of “exuberant colours” (Ofeimun 44) in the war’s poetic representation, and by so doing it pays tribute to “the memory of those lost / in paths of rain and ruin” (43). This reference to the ruin instantiated by the conflict also resonates strikingly with the moment in *Into the Heart* when Mona portrays her shattering experiences of the war as a catalyst for personal and political transformation (*IHB* 84). In Ofeimun’s poem, the memorialisation of those who died during the struggle is generated, and indeed underpinned, by such an articulation of loss.

While Ofeimun’s collection is driven by an ethical imperative to respond to the legacies of the war, it is also deliberately provocative. In an interview given shortly after the

release of *The Poet Lied*, the poet reveals that the idea for the piece crystallised after he read J. P. Clark's poetic portrayal of the war in *Casualties, 1966–68* (1970): "JP Clark was saying in fact that he and others, not only the dead, were casualties [...]. I also tried to show that in his poems [...] a lot of the emotions dredged up appeared fake" ("Conversation with Odiya Ofeimun" 148). As Clark is a contemporary of renowned writers such as Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo, Ofeimun's poem also represents a barely veiled attack on the Nigerian literary establishment.<sup>36</sup> However, the poet also suggests that he wanted *The Poet Lied* to "take all the statements made by various people during that period of shame in our history and to set them against their actions" (171). On the one hand, this reflexive poetic project reflects Ofeimun's membership of what the literary scholar Stephanie Newell describes as "the loose confederation of writers known in Nigeria as the 'AlterNative' literary movement" (130), which came to the fore during the political turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s. Including writers such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Femi Osofisan, the group's creative outputs "present the difficulty of asserting a political position that is resistant and radical without being reactionary or assimilated by the dominant power" (Newell 132). Ofeimun attempts to produce just this kind of balanced but politically pointed literature by engaging in a process of radically decentring self-reflexivity, which lends poetic force to the formfooling aesthetic that runs through the Biafran war arts explored in this chapter.

Quoting Shoshana Felman's response to Theodor Adorno's assessment of the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, Chute supports the view that "all of thinking, all of writing [...] has now to think, to write *against itself*" (Felman qtd. in Chute 33, italics in original). I would argue that the creative works explored in this chapter all enact such a process of self-examination as a way of bearing witness to and memorialising the war. By pushing the limits of form and content, they forge disruptive fissures that create a productive

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<sup>36</sup> These four writers have been called the "Ibadan quartet" (Jeyifo 5), as they all attended University College Ibadan in the 1950s.

space for multi-layered reimaginings. This productive fissuring also affects the experience of the readers and audiences of these works. As argued above, the narratives of Acholonu, Obe and Saro-Wiwa all demonstrate a keen awareness of the position of the spectator.

While Chute argues that it is the paradoxical interplay between absence and presence in comics that provokes the participation of readers (17), Hochberg helps to further refine understanding of this interpretive self-awareness. Exploring subversive re-visionings in artistic responses to Israel's occupation of Palestine, Hochberg contends: "Unlike the majority of the popular circulating images of the conflict and the Israeli Occupation that seek immediate readability [...], the realm of visuality explored in these artworks relies not on immediacy but rather on *slowing down* and becoming aware of our process of reading the images" (34, italics in original). Such a process of slowing down, which draws attention to the processes involved in reading images (Hochberg 34), is also bound up with processes of reflexive estrangement and is, I believe, woven into the aesthetics and poetics of formfooling delineated in the chapter. Indeed, the specific instantiation of the idea of formfooling in *Sozaboy* enshrines the deeper creative significance of this process of slowing down.

The idea of formfooling is explicitly invoked in the text after Sozaboy becomes a prisoner of the sinister Manmuswak, a spectral personification of authority and war in the novel (Apter 146), whose name is a corruption of the phrase "a man must live (eat) by whatever means" (*Sozaboy* 184). Although Sozaboy is tortured by Manmuswak, he avoids execution by claiming that he is an apprentice driver – which was his occupation before the war (*Sozaboy* 1) – rather than a soldier. Manmuswak tests the veracity of Sozaboy's story by ordering him to drive his Land Rover, threatening to have the young man's tongue cut out should he be found to be a liar. Faced with this grim fate, Sozaboy attempts to move the vehicle:

I took the key and ran inside the motor one time. I think you know that to talk true I am not actually driver. I have not get licence and although I can fit to move the motor small, I never drive long way before but I know that if I enter motor, I can move it.

[...]

And you know, as something used to happen, I actually moved that land rover. I moved it. No trouble at all. I drove. I drove. [...] And I was prouder of myself because, before before, my master will not even allow me to hold the steering wheel. [...] But today, I know that water will pass gari if I just formfool. (*Sozaboy* 125)

In this passage, the narrator-protagonist uses references to his past, and to the reader, to slow down and complicate the narrative's progression. After he describes entering the vehicle, the narrator reminds the reader – “I think you know” (*Sozaboy* 125) – that he is “not actually driver” (125). Moreover, his subsequent revelation that he was able to move the Land Rover is framed by another address to the reader: “And you know” (*Sozaboy* 125). These gestures are interpellative, implicating the reader in Sozaboy's precarious situation by asking them to reflect on their knowledge of the protagonist's story, and to confirm his miraculous evasion of Manmuswak's violence. By doing so, they disrupt the development of the narrative, and draw attention to the act of reading itself.

On another level, by underscoring his worrying lack of expertise, Sozaboy also imbues his negotiation of this moment of peril with a measure of playfulness and levity. The narrator's suggestion that he hoped to be able to move the vehicle even though he had never been allowed to hold the steering wheel during his apprenticeship works to humorously subvert the grave and grim reality facing him.<sup>37</sup> This subversive quality becomes tied to the idea of formfooling at the end of the passage, with Sozaboy revealing that “I know that water will pass gari if I just formfool” (*Sozaboy* 125). In the glossary to the text provided by the author, several parts of this quotation are translated. In Saro-Wiwa's ‘standard’ English, ‘water will pass gari’ represents a situation where matters have come to a head, such as when too much water is added to gari during cooking (187). Furthermore, and as I noted earlier in

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<sup>37</sup> My reading of Sozaboy's response to his precarious situation, and to the broader socio-political crisis, resonates with critical debates about the picaresque qualities of African soldier narratives. For example, Maureen Moynagh argues that such “memoirs and novels attempt to break free of the constraints imposed by the conventions of human rights narratives” (40) by “recount[ing] the morally untenable” (40). Although Moynagh focuses on child-soldier narratives, and Sozaboy is portrayed as a young man rather than a child, his subversive storytelling can still be read as embodying a picaresque sensibility.

the chapter, the word ‘formfool’ is defined as a mistake or an instance of fooling around (*Sozaboy* 183). Although Saro-Wiwa’s definition of formfooling implies that it is a dangerous activity to be avoided, in this scene it can also be interpreted as helping to negotiate the distance between Sozaboy’s state of bodily and subjective vulnerability. It inscribes the fractured narrative with a different kind of transformative potential: a playful and resistant form of affective agency that resonates with Bakhtin’s theorisation of folk humour and the carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (originally published in Russian in 1968). Responding to the folk traditions of medieval Europe, Bakhtin asserts:

[F]orms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition ... offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world [...] and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom[.] (*Rabelais* 5–6)

While I am not suggesting that Saro-Wiwa’s portrayal of a war in twentieth-century West Africa should be equated with the folk cultures of medieval Europe, I do think that Bakhtin’s theorisation of the subversive realm of the carnival helps to define the vein of ludic force that runs through *Sozaboy*. Indeed, as Sozaboy experiences the tragedy and trauma of war, the rotten mode of representation used to bear witness to it is laced with a form of playful and affective mediation. This ludic modality works to resist the totalising effects of violence and to inscribe alternative and enigmatic meanings in the text.

Apter gestures towards this deeper layer of significance in *Sozaboy* by arguing that its idiosyncratic textuality confers “force to states of affect” (142). While I agree with this reading of the affective dynamics at play in the text, Apter’s overarching reading of the novel as “figur[ing] death and spectrality within the rhetoric of grammatical incorrectness” (147) merely reinforces the idea that violence overwhelms Sozaboy’s narration. As a counterpoint to this interpretation, the penultimate part of this chapter explores the way these Nigeria-Biafra war narratives employ playfulness and humour in order to manipulate the affective regimes which work, in alternative ways, to frame and risk their portrayals of Biafra.

## 2.8 The affects of formfooling

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie offer a useful definition of the workings and effects of affect. Drawing from the work of Felix Guattari, they define affect as having three key aspects. Firstly, they consider affect as “transitive” (Bertelsen and Murphie 140): as “the movement of impersonal forces, or we could say ‘pre-personal’ forces [...], in which we are caught up” (140). Secondly, they view affect as “emotion or feeling, the folding of broader affective intensities into the nervous system” (Bertelsen and Murphie 140). Thirdly, they consider an aspect of affect that “perhaps lies in between the other two” (Bertelsen and Murphie 140), and which therefore has a distinctive mediating function. This third aspect, Bertelsen and Murphie argue, mirrors Baruch de Spinoza’s formulation of the “power to affect and be affected” (qtd. in Bertelsen and Murphie 140), which casts affect as the promise and possibility of transformation. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg further develop this theorisation of affect’s mediating powers:

Affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity – a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations – that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility[.] (2, italics in original)

Such a conception of affect’s in-betweenness is particularly useful to a study of cultural responses to the Nigeria-Biafra war, because of the primacy of this notion within postcolonial theory. For example, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the theorist Homi Bhabha asserts that “‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). Using these conceptualisations of affect as a processual form of forceful potential and relatedness, I argue that Obe’s and Acholonu’s narratives, as with *Sozaboy*, play with the affective-political

frameworks that try to manipulate their reception. By doing so, I add another critical vector to the nexus of paradigms currently explored in Biafran war arts scholarship.

As illustrated earlier in the chapter, Obe's narrative returns time and again to the image of the refugee child. However, the presentation of this figure in a further photograph (see Figure 7) differs from those other pictures in several key respects.

Fig. 7. Peter Obe, *Nigeria: A decade of crises in pictures*, Peter Obe Photo Agency, 1971, p. 185. Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 all portray children being cared for by agents of the Nigerian military government in Lagos: the country's commercial centre and then capital city. By contrast, Figure 7 captures the image of a refugee child in the heart of the beleaguered Biafran state. This places the child in the main theatre of the war; a perilous setting which, in combination with his dirty and under-nourished form, stresses his physical vulnerability in comparison to the other infants in the images. And yet, while all the photographs are inscribed with the paternalistic and threatening presence of soldiers, the child's expressive reaction in Figure 7



– so different from the dour faces present in the other images – plays with the deeper affective structures underpinning the narrative.

On the surface, the child's brightly lit and smiling face is a response to the food which, it is implied, has been given by the soldier. This inscription of cheerful emotion works to retrospectively prove the necessity of Nigeria's military effort – and to shore up the general population's continuing support for it – by casting the victorious state's actions in Biafra as a generous and timely humanitarian intervention. This compositional decision seeks to provoke but also tailors the reader's affective responses to the war's iconic legacy, supporting Pérouse de Montclos' point about the reality of Biafra's humanitarian situation being “lost in translation” (70). Indeed, the fact that Nigeria was central in instigating the war that caused this child's displacement is largely glossed over in *Nigeria: a decade in crises*. Yet, as my earlier analysis shows Obe's photographs opening up spaces of signifying ambiguity within the wider narrative, so the child's smiling face – which returns the camera's gaze – does not simply represent a positive response to the food in his hands. Rather, it also shows him submitting to, and confronting, the oppressive will of those trying to control the affects of his image. The Nigerian state is explicitly rendered as one of these manipulating forces, represented in the photograph by the uniformed legs of the soldiers. However, the reflexive form of the image also implicates the photographer and the spectator in its affective framing. Seigworth and Gregg help to draw out the significance of this complex force encounter, arguing that “affect is integral to a body's perpetual *becoming* [...] by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself – webbed in its relations – until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter” (3, *italics in original*). As affect works to disrupt and reimagine the boundaries of the body, so the various emotional and political forces working to mediate the child's signification in the frame of Obe's photograph are also in a state of flux. The image blurs the frames and feelings that simultaneously try to bind it.

This reading of Figure 7 supports Ben Anderson's assertion that "[a]ffect is the limit to power because it is limitless" (Anderson 166). Given its excessive, promissory force, affect helps to trace, delimit and fissure the structures of power that it helps to generate. While various political and narrative forces impact on Obe's image of the child, that very overdetermination inscribes it with the capacity to lay bare those structures. Indeed, the child's affected smile and his direct stare, which confronts the gaze of the spectator as well as the photographer, open up the possibility for a new way of seeing and feeling his plight. Such a dynamic creates a ripple in the affective framework of the image, gesturing towards the child's subjective agency even as other forces try to deny it.

A related process of affective subversion also emerges in *Into the Heart*, although with different effects. At the beginning of Act 3 Scene 1, Chume returns to the stage; while his family has been holed up in the refugee camp, he has developed a ludic strategy for surviving the war:

[...] It's a rat's life. But this is the only way to survive in these times. (*He surveys his rags*) Dress like a mad man, walk like a cripple, talk like a lunatic, then [...] they will say. 'He is suffering from shell-shock.' The soldiers will let you alone. No more conscription, no more war front, no more 'double up.' [...] But I double them up to get anything I want – money, food [*size*] even women. Yes, with rags I can get anything I want, anything. And I am assured of a longer survival [...] than any normal person in Biafra today. (*IHB* 59, italics in original)

Chume reveals that his survival has been facilitated through processes of affective doubling and simulation. By fashioning himself a lunatic persona – a performative double of his 'normal' and sane self – he is able to evade conscription and protect himself from the violence of the war. Survival is not the only object of this mode of simulated insanity, however. The perverse logic of Chume's security being assured by a performance of mental precarity, which reemphasises the ludic quality of the formfooling modality previously located in *Sozaboy*, is itself doubled and subverted in this passage. Indeed, its symbiotic other is manifested as an excessive will to power in Chume: "I can get anything I want, anything" (*IHB* 59).

During the rest of the scene, Chume uses these newfound affective powers – his ability to performatively shift between states of sanity and insanity – to manipulate two artillerymen to do his bidding. At one point, Chume explains: “You see, if you want make Africa man worship you, speak English, speak Queen’s English, the one wey get many big words. No mind whether you understand am or you no understand am, just talk am. Road go de open for you, understand?” (*IHB* 66–7). Chume is able to use his superior knowledge of English to rework language’s expressive potentialities into a system of control. This explanation resonates strikingly with the interrogation of “big grammar” (*Sozaboy* 3) in Saro-Wiwa’s novel, a term which functions as an obfuscating tool of oppression. Near the beginning of the text, the narrator suggests: “Before before, the grammar was not plenty and everybody was happy. [...] As grammar plenty, na so trouble plenty. And as trouble plenty, na so plenty people were dying” (3). *Sozaboy* draws a direct link between the affective power of English as a colonial language and the destructive effects of violence. This suggests that Chume’s actions in *Into the Heart* may have adverse consequences, dragging him further into the crisis even as they appear to insulate him from it.

This prognosis is confirmed later in the scene when Chume learns that a division of the Biafran army is approaching their district. Both emboldened and confounded by his affective manipulation of madness, he asserts that “[n]a only war go settle dis thing” (*IHB* 68), and heads off stage to prepare an ambush. A linguistic shift from standard to pidgin English attends this call to violence, intimating a breaking down of his affected authority. Indeed, the contradictions inherent in such an unstable form of affective play work to subvert Chume’s protective logic of mental precarity, leading him to blindly submit to the irrational forces of violence and strike against the Biafran forces even though he himself is a Biafran. In Anderson’s exploration of the construction and management of affects, particularly of the idea of collective morale during periods of ‘total war’, he contends: “morale exists as an object and medium of power because it escapes the excess of attempts to demarcate its scope

and effects. Morale is grasped and handled as a diffuse potentiality instead of a fixed, locatable target” (182). I would argue that madness functions in such a way in *Into the Heart*. It acts as an affective medium of power that both defies control and confuses ideas of personal and national identification.

*Into the Heart* does not simply yield to the destructive effects of war, however. In the following scene, which commences in the aftermath of the skirmish initiated by Chume and the other artillerymen, it is revealed that Chume has been physically blinded, which corporeally reinforces the effects of his blinkered perspective. When he is confronted with another artilleryman from the ‘enemy’ Biafran camp, this both embodied and symbolic loss of sight forces Chume to creatively reformulate his conception of the war as well as his sense of identity. Chume’s initial interaction with the other soldier, who has also been crippled by the fighting, is laced with dark comedy. The stage directions indicate that as the injured men attempt to get up from the ground, “[t]hey both bump into each other and fall, get up again, bump into each other and again they fall” (*IHB* 73, italics in original). The pathetic affect produced as a result of this slapstick spectacle is further underscored by the revelation that the crippled Biafran artilleryman is the notorious “General Blood” (*IHB* 73).

The comic indignity meted out to Chume and the General in the scene in spite of their suffering works to complicate and challenge the audience’s responses to their violent actions. As these perpetrators of war have become victims of it, the play forces the spectator to consider whether it is ethical to laugh at their plight. In their work on the cultural functions of humour, Ivette Cardena and Roland Littlewood contend that it can have resistant psychosocial effects. They argue that it offers an “alternative means for the processing of unbearable aspects of experience” (Cardena and Littlewood 288). While the narratives of Obe and Saro-Wiwa certainly produce both formally and affectively subversive visions of the Biafran war, Acholonu goes further by using humour to propose a new corporeal as well as subjective formulation of human interaction in the aftermath of the conflict.

CHUME: Hmm so wetin we go do? (*Pause, he contemplates*) Wait. I get one idea for my head. You no get leg, right? And I no get eye, hmm? O.k. But you get eye and I get leg. Suppose I carry you, we go fit survive, no be so? I go share my leg with you and you go share your eye with me.

GENERAL: (*Pause, he thin[k]s, then*): Fantastic idea. Ol' boy, make we try am. We go de live like husband and wife. No, no be like husband and wife, we go live like one person. (*IHB 74, italics in original*)

At first, the General humorously accepts Chume's proposed strategy of survival through physical and affective collaboration. He suggests that it will require them to simulate, and thus transgress, heterosexual cultural norms, adding a further layer of subversive meaning to the crisis in masculinity and patriarchal authority represented by the Old Man in the earlier refugee camp scene. And yet, the General's newly amplified sense of personal precariousness is also comically expressed when he subsequently reveals that he is worried about being dropped by Chume if he should fart on him. Although the Chume of the previous scene might have ridiculed the General for this honest display of vulnerability, Chume's first-hand experience of the violence of war enables him to empathise with his adversary and understand the necessity of cooperation: "If you punish me for my mouth and I punish you for your armpit and your fart we no go get anywhere. We two go suffer, we two go perish" (*IHB 77*).

Cardeña and Littlewood explore the social imperative underpinning such a collaborative and ludic response to crisis, arguing that "humour as a cultural product in threatened communities seems to speak for the need to adjust our individual-centred accounts [in order] to transcend the incongruous and the threatening" (292). This formulation also resonates with Butler's assertion that precarious life "implies life as a conditioned process, and not as the internal feature of a monadic individual" (*Frames of War* 23). Out of necessity, then, Chume and the General provide for each other the conditions required to make the continuation of their lives possible. I further explore the significance of such instances of transgressive queering in Biafran war narratives in the third chapter of

the thesis. However, it is crucial to underscore at this stage that the many forms of aesthetic and affective rupture woven through Acholonu's play culminate in a radical, if partial, deployment of gender and sexual subversion.

In related ways, the formfooling Biafran war narratives of Obe, Saro-Wiwa and Acholonu all offer interrogative and generative, even promissory creative frameworks for responding to Biafra's divisive legacies. Indeed, their narratives arguably embody the enigmatic third meaning found by Barthes in his definition of the filmic. Barthes suggests that popular representational forms such as the photo-novel and the comic-strip express a kind of obtuse signifier: "There may thus be a future – or a very ancient past – truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture" (Barthes, *Image Music Text* 66). Although Chute uses this quotation to back up her claim that comics is a singularly powerful form when it is used to bear witness to crisis, I would argue that the formfooling Biafran arts studied in this chapter embody and reimagine the promise of this foolish, subversive and dialectical modality. Despite their clear contrasts, they all span the 'high' and 'low' of culture by using and abusing the conventions of form. In doing so, they contribute to a reflexive and interrogative aesthetic that affectively exceeds the arbitrary limits of politics, style, identity and disciplinarity: all of which have been used to try and control the signifying legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war.

## **2.9 Coda: Reframing Biafra's precarious condition**

In this chapter, I have argued that the Biafran narratives of Obe, Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa produce radical re-visionings of established frameworks and create alternative paradigms of representation and response in relation both to the conflict and its socio-cultural consequences. They also illustrate the crucial role played by the Nigerian arts in creatively showing and resisting the work of the various frames and war machines, which have established zones of creative and material exception in relation to the conflict. Breaking

through the discursive and physical violence of such oppressive frameworks, these narratives rearticulate Festus Iyayi's assertion in his Biafra novel *Heroes* (1986) that expressions of humanity must transcend those of survival in the aftermath of war: "*In peacetime, the art of survival is not enough. The art of humanity takes over*" (241, italics in original). Through their evocations of such humane modes of creativity, Obe, Acholonu and Saro-Wiwa all open up bold new artistic avenues for the narrative of the Biafran conflict. They produce profound and ethical responses to the struggle that work to reimagine its destructive consequences.

In sum, this chapter has used the formfooling modality and fissuring force expressed by artists in response to Biafra to open up alternative trajectories – both creative and critical – for conceptualising the conflict's creative legacies. In arguing for scholarly approaches that cut across formal and political boundaries, it has sought to advance more nuanced appreciations of the war's cultural heritage. The scholar Akachi Odoemene complicates this view in an essay exploring ideas of ethnic balkanisation in narratives of the Biafran war. Concluding his analysis, Odoemene contends that the perpetuation of biased and conflicting narratives denies the possibility of a dispassionate and neutral exploration of Biafra (193). I would assert, however, that by foregrounding as well as interrogating the affective and aesthetic regimes that have been crucial to the war's cultural reception, these narratives capture the precarious condition of Biafra and imaginatively adapt it in order to broaden its artistic and ethical horizons.

Returning to the excerpt from *The Abiara Declaration* that forms the epigraph to this chapter, I conclude that this quotation succinctly expresses the formfooling modality uncovered in Obe's, Acholonu's and Saro-Wiwa's narratives: "We are adaptable because as a people we are convinced that in the world 'no condition is permanent'" (Ojukwu 301). As this quotation obliquely portends, artists from across the political and creative spectrum have been driven to bear witness to Biafra's precarious condition – its shifting mediation of different narratives, politics and affects – ever since the state ceased to exist as a material

entity. By adapting the story of the conflict and reflexively manifesting its complex realities, they contribute to a mediating and memorialising dialogue that has been continually reimagined since 1970. The following chapter will elaborate on the politics and poetics of these modes of adaptation. It considers the impact of mixed media and transnational trajectories, as well as global market forces, on the radical aesthetics of formfooling that the war inspired in the arts of the Nsukka group.



### 3) Biafra's exilic legacies in the arts of the Nsukka group

Allowing the material, as I compose the work, to reveal itself despite my attempts at constraining it yields an element of surprise. (Dike 8)

These words are taken from an essay written by the Nigerian artist Ndidì Dike in response to one of her mixed media works, *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown* (2010) (see Figure 18). On one level, the epigraph engages specifically with the creative practice that underpins her multimedia art. By moulding and unveiling the physical properties of various recycled and found materials, Dike produces an unpredictable collage of mutating shapes, colours and textures. On another level, this process of experimental adaptation – which gives way to unknowable effects and forms – indexes a specific, transitive dynamic within the artistic legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war.

By studying a range of artists who – like Dike – have responded to Biafra using a variety of materials and forms, this chapter considers the broader ramifications of the formfooling, destabilising drive I located in the previous section. It reads, listens and feels between the lines of works produced by members of the Nsukka group – a loose confederation of artists with varying connections to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka – offering an important new opening for the scholarship surrounding the Biafran war's creative aftermath.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly, it foregrounds the practices of figures within the Nsukka group who have been driven to move across and between a variety of styles and genres in their responses to Biafra in every decade since the end of the war.

A crucial theoretical springboard for this section is provided by the Nsukka artist and art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu (previously known as Chika Okeke) in his monograph *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (2015). He argues that

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<sup>38</sup> Other notable members of the Nsukka group include Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, El Anatsui, Chinwe Uwatse, Tayo Adenaike, Ada Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe and Marcia Kure.

the war contributed to a “crisis in the postcolony” (Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism* 19); one which “underwrote the dramatic shift in style and themes of politically conscious artists (and writers)” (19).

Okeke-Agulu’s articulation of the fraught but dynamic postcolonial modernism achieved by Nigerian artists in the 1950s and 1960s – which he argues reached its creative zenith just as the Nigerian polity descended into violence (*Postcolonial Modernism* 289) – has had a significant bearing on my work. However, my intervention in this chapter is not principally concerned with tracing the artistic developments that took place in the run-up to the war, a period which Okeke-Agulu’s monograph considers in depth. Rather, I am interested in elucidating what happens to modes of creative expression in Nigeria in the aftermath of the Biafran crisis. Indeed, an important aim of this section is to trace and theorise the intersections between artists’ multimedia practices and the socio-political impact of the war. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that the transformative imperative undergirding these mixed media endeavours represents another dimension of the fissuring, formfooling aesthetic force I located in the previous chapter. This post-war impulse, I further suggest, adds another important dimension to the postcolonial Nigerian modernism that Okeke-Agulu argues was established in the period before the war.

While it is important to underscore that many other Nigerian artists and writers have used a variety of styles and genres to speak to Biafra’s aftermath, the Nsukka group provides a particularly useful prism through which to consider these developments.<sup>39</sup> The war not only provides the contextual basis for many of the artists’ creative maturation, but much of their work is preoccupied with exploring the Biafran crisis and its varied effects. Indeed, experiences of forced displacement and exile – within as well as from Biafra and Nigeria – play a particularly significant and variegated role in many of the Nsukka artists’ biographical

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<sup>39</sup> This broader group of artists includes figures such as Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, Eddie Iroh, Flora Nwapa and Kole Omotoso, who have all responded to Biafra using a variety of literary genres, most prominently in novels, poems and plays.

trajectories and creative practices. I have chosen, therefore, to highlight select artists' engagements with exile as a major consequence and legacy of the Nigeria-Biafra war. I also draw from a variety of exilic theories, from Neil Lazarus's and Revathi Krishnaswamy's critiques of mythologies of migrancy in postcolonial studies to Chinua Achebe's and Wole Soyinka's theoretical engagements with the subject. I then supplement these theoretical foundations with other pertinent aesthetic scholarship, including Stephen Clingman's work on navigation, Stuart Hall's formulation of articulation, and Jacques Rancière's theorisation of the politics of aesthetics and critical art. I have chosen this trio of critics because of the incisive and interrelated way they theorise the intersections between aesthetics and politics, which helps to draw out the complex mediations undertaken by Nsukka artists in the aftermath of Biafra.

In this section, I focus on four Nsukka group members in particular: Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Ndid Dike and Olu Oguibe. This is because of the distinctive but related ways that Biafra and ideas of exile are implicated in their artistic trajectories. All four of these figures are of Igbo descent and, in the grand tradition of the Nsukka group, are mixed media artists. Indeed, while their multimodal arts have developed in different ways, they share a creative concern for the Igbo aesthetic practice and idiom known as *uli*, which is a dynamic decorative art that uses curvilinear motifs and designs to navigate different modes of expression. By studying a number of their creative works and by drawing out the contrasts in their different experiences of the Nigeria-Biafra war, I seek to deepen understanding of the Nsukka group's broader exilic engagements with the conflict. I argue that Biafra plays a crucial and complex role in their multimedia negotiations of these related themes. Building on this analysis, it is also my contention that the exilic trajectories explored in and articulated by some of these artists' creations offer a vital optic through which Biafra's kaleidoscopic legacies can be explicated.

### 3.1 Theorising exile

While I find exile to be a useful way of theorising these artistic developments, I am conscious that the term comes with significant critical baggage. Numerous critics, Neil Lazarus and Revathi Krishnaswamy among them, have voiced their concerns about the way tropes of exile and migrancy have become mythologised within postcolonial studies. Lazarus is critical of the claim made by critics such as Homi Bhabha that “the labels of exile, migration, and diaspora [are] paradigmatic or constitutive of ‘postcoloniality’” (Lazarus 136–7), because this formulation “fails to address the material circumstances of the vast majority of migrants from the peripheries of the world system” (137). A similar position is taken by Krishnaswamy, who gives an overview of the problematic of exile in an essay exploring the writings of Salman Rushdie:

The figure of migrancy indeed has proven quite useful in drawing attention to the marginalized, in problematizing conceptions of borders, and in critiquing the politics of power. However, it also appears to have acquired an excessive figurative flexibility that threatens to undermine severely the oppositional force of postcolonial politics. The metaphorization of postcolonial migrancy is becoming so overblown, overdetermined, and amorphous as to repudiate any meaningful specificity of historical location or interpretation. Politically charged words such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘exile’ are being emptied of their histories of pain and suffering and are being deployed promiscuously to designate a wide array of cross-cultural phenomena. (Krishnaswamy 128)

Krishnaswamy’s pointed criticism of the distinctly postmodern turn that discourses of migrancy and exile have taken in postcolonial theory, which has tended to decouple them from their historical materiality and lumped them together with a range of different experiences, is well-made.<sup>40</sup> However, her article’s too brief engagement with African responses to this debate risks producing a different form of reductive thinking despite its broader desire to resist such tendencies. Quoting from Meenakshi Mukherjee’s analysis of the “centrality of Africa” (qtd. in Krishnaswamy 139) in the lives and work of three titans of

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<sup>40</sup> Another theorist who has raised concerns about this (post)modern treatment of the exilic condition is Edward W. Said. In the essay “Reflections on Exile” he observes that “[w]e have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement” (173).

the continent's literary world – Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – Krishnaswamy notes: "the views of Indian immigrant writers such as [V. S.] Naipaul and Rushdie depart from the positions taken by many African writers who, in the wake of colonialism, have sought to re-territorialize rather than de-territorialize themselves" (139). Krishnaswamy's reading of the so-called 'local' proclivities of African literatures make them less compatible with the postmodern theories of free-wheeling signification and boundary-blurring liminality which, she argues, have diminished the political vitality of much postcolonial literature.

While I agree that the complex realities of African experience are front and centre in the works of these writers, Krishnaswamy uses this correspondence to falsely conflate their views on exile and migrancy, and to promulgate the erroneous assumption that African arts have developed at a remove from the rest of the world. By doing so, she not only glosses over the way African territories have been affected by and embedded in the movement of bodies and capital around the globe, but she also elides the very historical particularities that her argument tries to foreground. Indeed, as the Ghanaian writer Kofi Anyidoho demonstrates in the introduction to the essay collection *The Word Behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile* (1997), exile is a prominent and complex phenomenon in the African postcolonial context. Anyidoho notes: "[t]he simple truth is that many of the new generation of Africans in exile, especially the so-called African Europeans, are mainly economic refugees who have been 'compelled' by ruthless postcolonial conditions to seek refuge [in the West]" (10).

Although Anyidoho laments this situation, he also asserts that "[a]n appallingly large number of African intellectuals, writers among them, have had to go into exile because of their determination to speak the truth about the injustices of their society" (Anyidoho 10). Anyidoho's analysis demonstrates that de-territorialisation – in a very material sense – has played a crucial role in the lives and creative trajectories of many African artists. To underscore this important point, a comparison between Soyinka's and Achebe's writings on

the subject gives a sense of the impact of exile on the Nigerian cultural context, particularly in the aftermath of the war.

At first glance, Soyinka's account of the relationship between the experiences of exile and the creative works of artists seems to correspond with the Rushdian model of the liberated migrant figure. In an essay dedicated to the subject, Soyinka broadly defines exile as a "liminal but dynamic condition" ("Africa: Exile" 63), and further asserts that, by embodying this condition, the artist "is compelled to learn a new language of the space beyond the frontiers, the mores, customs, taboos . . . in short, he [or she] encounters the new language of the frontiers of exile, its joys and anguish, its challenges" ("Africa: Exile" 65). Soyinka here makes a universalising claim about the generative effects of exile for artists, which he suggests forces them to navigate and transform various kinds of material and conceptual limits. And yet, while the writer notes that exile involves serious challenges, he does not mention his experiences during the Biafran crisis in the essay. This omission is striking, especially as his prison memoir *The Man Died* (1971) explores the feelings of isolation and estrangement he endured when incarcerated by the Nigerian military state during the conflict.

It is plausible that Soyinka's memories of his wartime imprisonment had been superseded by his more recent experiences of estrangement from Nigeria – he fled the country again in 1994 during the draconian regime of General Sani Abacha – when he came to write about exile at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is also a measure, however, of the complexities of exile that such biographical dissonances are woven into Soyinka's theorisation. By contrast, Achebe draws explicitly from the lexicon of exile in his war memoir *There Was a Country* (2012). Reflecting on the fall of Biafra, which forced many Igbo people to reorient themselves to the realities of Nigeria despite their bitter struggle for independence, Achebe asserts: "Nigeria had not succeeded in crushing the spirit of Igbo people, but it had left us indigent, stripped bare, and stranded in the wilderness" (*There Was*

*a Country* 228). Crucially, Achebe offers no suggestion in the memoir that the socio-political exile experienced by himself and other Igbo people following the end of the war was artistically enabling in the way Soyinka arguably intimates.<sup>41</sup> And yet, Achebe's earlier publication *Home and Exile* (2000) offers a more nuanced account of his relationship with Nigeria after Biafra's fall.

In a section titled "Letters from Home", Achebe reveals his concern "with the advertisement of expatriation and exile as intrinsically desirable goals for the writer" (*Home and Exile* 96). Instead, Achebe asserts that he "would rather be where [he] could see [his] work cut out for [him...]. In other words, [his] hometown" (*Home and Exile* 103). Although this statement of commitment and intent becomes tinged with sarcasm when he subsequently adds that "Nigeria may not sound altogether like an unqualified piece of good news" (*Home and Exile* 104) – a note of pessimism that becomes amplified in *There Was a Country* – he also makes this important concession about his homeland: "But I have never thought it was [an unqualified piece of good news]. Which is precisely what it means to have my work cut out for me" (*Home and Exile* 104). Achebe's strained relationship with Nigeria in the aftermath of Biafra would endure throughout his life. Yet the exilic sensibility instilled within Achebe by his negative experiences at the hands of the Nigerian state also imbues him, like Soyinka, with the sense that creative responses become more palpably necessary despite the perils involved.

So, while it is important to keep in mind Krishnaswamy's warning about the dangers of tropes of exile becoming hollowed out through repeated artistic reimagining, Soyinka's and Achebe's writings on the subject – with their distinctly Nigerian (and Biafran) inflections

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<sup>41</sup> Achebe's assertion that he felt stranded in Nigeria after the conflict's end is reflected in the relative drop in his creative output in the two decades following Biafra's defeat. He did not release a new novel until *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987, some twenty-two years after the publication of his previous one, *A Man of the People* (1966). By contrast, Soyinka was highly productive in the decade following the war. Many of his most iconic works – for example the memoir *The Man Died* (1971) and the poetry collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971) – were released in this period.

– suggest that there is always a double-movement in such narrative mediations, with the generative reconfiguring of these ideas being constantly nuanced by the lived and messy realities that contextualise them. With this analysis of the significances and complexities of exile in mind, I now turn to the arts of the Nsukka group. By exploring the careers and creative responses to Biafra of O. Udechukwu, A. Udechukwu, Dike and Oguibe, I demonstrate the importance of notions of exile and displacement in the war's artistic aftermath.

### **3.2 Tracing exilic and creative trajectories in the arts of the Nsukka group**

In terms of the key artists considered in this chapter, O. Udechukwu was in his mid-twenties when the war broke out. While committed to the Biafran cause, he witnessed first-hand the terrible human costs of the struggle. He was studying art in northern Nigeria when the massacres of Igbo and other eastern populations commenced in 1966, and, fearing for his life, moved back to the south-east to continue his education (O. Udechukwu, "An Interview" 54). After Biafra seceded in 1967, he got a job as a graphic designer for the Ministry of Information and remained in the enclave until its collapse in 1970 (O. Udechukwu, "An Interview" 55). By contrast, Oguibe, A. Udechukwu and Dike were all young children when the war began. Oguibe lived in the embattled state throughout the war and, like many children in the war-torn enclave, suffered from malnutrition (Ottenberg 223–4). The artist has also written about the multiple experiences of forced displacement that he and his family endured during the conflict (Oguibe, "Exile and the Creative Imagination" 4). Contrastingly, neither A. Udechukwu or Dike were directly affected by the war. A. Udechukwu's family relocated to the United States during the period of hostilities (Ottenberg 203), while Dike, who spent most of her childhood in the United Kingdom, did not move permanently to Nigeria until after the end of the conflict in 1974 (Ego Uche-Okeke para. 3). Furthermore, A. Udechukwu and Dike have produced little work that engages directly with Biafra, which



is in stark contrast to O. Udechukwu and Oguibe. Despite these differences, all four of these artists have explored forms of displacement and exile in their art, both in relation to their experiences and to Nigeria's post-war situation.

The Nigerian novelist and critic Isidore Okpewho links the notion of exile to several other thematic preoccupations of the Nsukka group. He suggests:

The war sensitized Igbo visual artists, as well as literary figures, dramatists, and musicians, to the mass movements of displaced persons, to refugee problems, hunger, illness, death, and disease, as well as to political hegemony, beyond what they might otherwise have experienced. (Okpewho 2)

Okpewho emphasises that the sensitivity instilled in artists by Biafra, and particularly in those of Igbo descent, not only provokes them to respond to the conflict in their art. As he asserts, it also stimulates work which both encompasses and goes beyond Biafra's specific effects. While Okpewho glosses over the multi-ethnic make-up of the Nsukka group by singling out the work of Igbo artists, I find his formulation of the sensitising effects of the war – and particularly the forms of exile it instigated – to be highly suggestive.<sup>42</sup> A principal definition of sensitivity is as “[t]he state or property of being capable of sensation [...], or of perceiving sensations of a particular type; the degree to which something or someone is capable of sensation” (*OED*). For the purposes of my analysis, I am particularly interested in the third facet of this definition, which emphasises the scalar dimension of states and capabilities of sensitivity. Such a designation also gestures to the affective functions of the concept.

In the last chapter, I explored artists' narrative and aesthetic manipulations of various affects bound up with the Biafran war's reception and legacies. Such a process is certainly present in the arts of the Nsukka group. However, in this part of the thesis I am more

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<sup>42</sup> Several prominent members of the group are not Igbo. For example, the renowned sculptor El Anatsui was born in Ghana and is of Ewe heritage (Ottenberg 11), while the watercolourist Tayo Adenaike hails from Yorubaland in the western part of Nigeria (181). Another, the mixed media artist Marcia Kure, is Jama'a, a minority Christian group based in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north (Jegade 128). While it is important to highlight the diverse backgrounds of the group, it should also be underscored that the idea of distinct ethnic groupings developed during the colonial period and does not accurately reflect the complexity of Nigeria's cultural make-up. As Njoku notes, while ethnic divisions existed before the colonial period, they became institutionalised in the era around independence and in the years preceding the war (265–7).

concerned with teasing out how the affective registers and degrees of sensitivity shape the multimedia and cross-media practices that artists use to respond to Biafra's exilic significances. While Okpewho conveys a powerful sense of the multiplex and dynamic forms that their creative responses have taken, I develop his analysis by conceptualising the group's shared concern for moving beyond the specificities of the conflict in their art to situate it within broader socio-cultural and psychological fields, and to navigate its complex terrain. I demonstrate that by delineating and traversing the experiences of different people exiled by the war through their multimedia creative practices, the Nsukka artists utilise the complex realities of Biafra to navigate the post-war paradigm and articulate numerous political-aesthetic possibilities.

As suggested above, one of the Nsukka artists concerned with exploring the displacement of peoples before, during and after the Biafran war is O. Udechukwu. He has produced multiple visual and poetic works that engage with the theme across several decades, notably in the woodcut *The Exiles (Facing the Unknown)* (1973) (see Figure 8), the pen and ink drawing *Journey into the Unknown* (1989) (see Figure 9), the acrylic and ink painting *Our Journey* (1993) (see Figure 10) and the poem titled "Return of the Exiles" (1970). In the programme that accompanied an exhibition of his visual art titled *Five Themes Fifty-Five Works* (1980), O. Udechukwu notes the inspiration of a line from Okogbule Wonodi's poem *Dusts of Exile* (1971): "He was of the exile train / that moved from town to town" (qtd. in O. Udechukwu, "Introduction" 3). O. Udechukwu adds that the line "summarizes a theme that has continued to interest me since 1966, namely that of refugees, the oppressed, the suffering and struggling anonymous masses" (O. Udechukwu, "Introduction" 3). Indeed, the artist goes on to give a fuller sense of the creative shift the war provoked in his creative practice in the essay:

What has concerned me more than any other thing since then has been the search for the most appropriate idiom for communicating the experiences of my innermost being, the perennial questions and issues, the anguish and the ecstasy, experiences which may belong to human commonality but which the artist, as a sensitive medium, is equipped to distil and chronicle[.] (O. Udechukwu, "Introduction" 3)

As with Okpewho's portrayal of the Nsukka artists as 'sensitised' due to their encounters with Biafra, so O. Udechukwu describes his post-war arts as being driven by a form of creative sensitivity that developed out of his experiences of the conflict. O. Udechukwu also goes beyond Okpewho's definition, asserting that the sensitivity which the war was instrumental in instilling in him is also bound up with his search for "the most appropriate idiom" ("Introduction" 3) for communicating and distilling those recollections. This suggests that the sensitivity at play in the works of the Nsukka group does not just function as an affective or thematic register, but that they are inscribed in the very creative forms they employ to mediate their memories of the crisis. Indeed, I would argue that the group's utilisation and adaptation of the linear *uli* aesthetic tradition, which originated in Igboland, has been particularly significant in enabling them to respond ethically and sensitively to the war.

Elizabeth A. Péri defines *uli* as "an important woman's art form in southeastern Nigeria. Women decorated male and female bodies with the dye from the *uli* pod, and painted murals on walls incorporating designs in the *uli* idiom" (37). There are many different *uli* symbols, and artists traditionally revise them and create their own. As such, there is no uniform style or fixed lexicon across Igboland. However, *uli*'s feminine foundations were complicated when the male and institutionally-trained artist Uche Okeke adapted the *uli* aesthetic in the late 1950s. U. Okeke was a leading faculty member in the Department of Applied and Fine Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka from 1970 to 1986 (Ottenberg 71), and along with other established artists, including Chike Aniakor and Chuka Amaefunah, encouraged students to experiment with traditional art practices such as *uli* (Ottenberg 73). U. Okeke was therefore central in bringing about the form's modern adaptation as a unifying aesthetic for the Nsukka group in subsequent decades.

While U. Okeke's significance in the history of the Nsukka group cannot be denied, Nkiru Nzegwu has criticised the way male artists have come to dominate the female artistic tradition of *uli*. Writing about Dike's sculptural use of *uli*, Nzegwu argues that the "subtle, yet progressive substitution of the male for the female creative vision in contemporary *uli* art" (123) has led to the "invidious delegitimation of women's art" (123). Nzegwu also suggests that the reinterpretation of *uli* aesthetics by male artists such as U. Okeke and Aniakor might not even deserve to be called *uli*: "Since *uli* is a specifically defined system, and since the design logic and motifs derive from women's peculiar abbreviations of nature's protean qualities, any definition or works that avoids the centrality of these features cannot properly claim to be *uli*" (114). While Nzegwu's criticism relies on a somewhat rigid interpretation of the *uli* form's historical usage, I further consider the issues she raises about the gender politics of the Nsukka group's creative reception of the *uli* form when I explore Dike's work later in the chapter. For now, I want to sketch out the historical context in which U. Okeke redeployed this artistic tradition.

Okeke-Agulu argues that U. Okeke's experiments with *uli* in the 1950s and 1960s "must be seen as the ultimate artistic implication of the idea of natural synthesis" (196), which was a political-aesthetic project developed by the artist and fellow members of the Zaria Art Society. The Society was founded in 1958 by art students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria Branch, and other notable members included Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, and Simon Okeke (Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism* 85). The idea of natural synthesis developed out of the society's artistic experiments, which tried to mediate between the contrasting influences of colonialism and indigenous tradition, and thus contributed to the broader nationalistic project of Nigerian decolonisation that was gathering pace at this time. As Okeke-Agulu puts it:

[W]hether or not 'synthesis' was used to describe the task of black and African artists and intellectuals of the age of decolonization, there was a widespread understanding that this work must entail the reflexive appropriation and combination of European and African cultural, technical, and conceptual resources. (*Postcolonial Modernism* 92)

The Zaria Society did not invent this notion of artistic synthesis, however. Other notable Nigerian modernists such as Ben Enwonwu and Aina Onabolu had been forging a similar path decades before the society came together.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie speculates that U. Okeke's interest in the *uli* form was sparked when he saw Enwonwu's portrayal of *uli* symbols in work exhibited at Jos Museum in 1956 ("Revolution and evolution" 135). Moreover, while the *uli* aesthetic was one of many traditions that artists drew from to achieve these nationalistic aims, the remarkable output of the Nsukka group since the late 1960s makes *uli*'s contribution to postcolonial Nigerian art particularly significant. To demonstrate the historical significance of this idiom, I now turn to the post-war arts of O. Udechukwu. Studying several key works and drawing out the similarities as well as the contrasts between them, I elucidate the way the artist has navigated different aspects of the conflict and its legacies.

### 3.3 Navigating lines in Obiora Udechukwu's post-war visual arts

One of O. Udechukwu's early post-war responses to the mass movement of people instigated by the Biafran crisis is his woodcut *The Exiles (Facing the Unknown)* (1973) (see Figure 8).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For accounts of the artistic careers of Enwonwu and Onabolu, see *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (2008) by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie and "Aina Onabolu and Naturalism in Nigerian Visual Arts" (2010) by Godwin Ogheneruemu Iriwieri.

<sup>44</sup> I henceforth refer to *The Exiles (Facing the Unknown)* as simply *The Exiles*.



Fig. 8. Obiora Udechukwu, *The Exiles (Facing the Unknown)*, 1973, woodcut on paper.  
H x W: 30.4 x 24.6 cm. © Obiora Udechukwu.

The woodcut, produced through a process of relief printing on paper, portrays a couple fleeing the massacres committed against Igbo populations in the north of Nigeria before the war. The background imagery locates the couple in northern Nigeria because, as Rebecca Wolff notes, “[t]he geometricized black outlines of buildings in the background [...] represent the flat-roofed architecture that is common in the North” (para. 18). Also noteworthy is the sun image in the background, which indexes the title of Biafra’s national anthem – “Land of the Rising Sun” – an aspirational maxim that is also emblazoned on the state’s flag (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 151–2). This detail implies that the woodcut is also intended to invoke the refugee crisis that developed in the enclave following the secession. Indeed, the hazy, translucent quality of the woodcut seems to suggest that the sun is setting, perhaps prophesying the coming war and its troubled aftermath. I highlight the fact that this is a *post-war* creation because O. Udechukwu was active both before and during the conflict.

However, the artist has written that the watershed moment between his early visual art and later works “would be somewhere around 1970. At that time, my oeuvre began [...]to show a noticeable shift from mere reproduction of objective reality to a more subjective and exploratory stance” (O. Udechukwu, “Introduction” 3). Given that the aim of this thesis is to explore artistic legacies of the Biafran war and not to focus on developments that took place during it, I do not have sufficient space to test O. Udechukwu’s theory by trying to locate the moment of transition in his art during the war years. Instead, this section teases out and elucidates the way that the “subjective and exploratory stance” (O. Udechukwu, “Introduction” 3) he formulates plays out aesthetically during the post-war period.

To illuminate Udechukwu’s sensitive response to the war in the woodcut *The Exiles*, it is necessary to theorise some of the formal aspects of the *uli* art practice. Traditionally, *uli* symbols are abstract and decorative, and they do not necessarily represent specific objects or concepts, although this is often the case. While not every part of *The Exiles* corresponds with a particular *uli* form, the compositional and aesthetic contours of the *uli* art practice – which principally involves abstract and lyrical lines that balance movement with stillness and absence with presence – help to unpack the nuances of O. Udechukwu’s interpretation of Biafra. In terms of specific *uli* motifs, O. Udechukwu repeatedly employs the *agwolagwo* spiral in his portrayal of the hair of the exiled woman. Okeke-Agulu defines the word *agwolagwo* as “a descriptive term for things wrapped or folded into a coil, such as the headcarrier’s cloth pad or, more significantly, the coiled royal python” (*Obiora Udechukwu: Line, Image, Text* 21).<sup>45</sup>

While this definition explains the cultural basis of the swirling symbol, it is important to reassert that abstract *uli* designs are, historically, used for decorative rather than specifically symbolic or representational purposes. So, the *agwolagwo* spiral can be used to signify and embellish a variety of idea, shapes and meanings. There are also triangular *uli* motifs in the

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<sup>45</sup> I henceforth refer to *Obiora Udechukwu: Line, Image, Text* (2016) as simply *Obiora Udechukwu*.

woodcut that evoke the leopard's claw symbol (Willis 113), or perhaps represent the head of the kola nut symbol (113). I resist defining the motifs because there are myriad and subtle differences between them, and because there is no fixed or exhaustive lexicon. Indeed, O. Udechukwu reveals in an interview with the anthropologist and curator Simon Ottenberg that he has "tried to create [his] own signs" (O. Udechukwu, "Video interview" 12), a practice which corresponds with Sarah Adam's observation that, traditionally, *uli* artists' "patterns are not jealously guarded but freely borrowed and shared between women" (57).

Okeke-Agulu (writing as Chika Okeke) also provides a useful definition of some of the key facets of *uli*: "there is an abiding fascination with organic, curvilinear design elements, especially the line in *uli*. [T]his [...] aesthetic demanded formal simplicity, a reduction of and abstraction from pictorial elements to their very essence using few gestural lines" (15). Crucial in Okeke-Agulu's analysis is his focus on the linkages between the dynamic linearity, the organic production and the abstracting representation of *uli* designs. Indeed, as an abstract form, O. Udechukwu's use of different *uli* motifs in *The Exiles* works to produce a clarified vision of the refugee experience. Moreover, as the *agwolagwo* spirals coil inwards and outwards and other lines intersect and spread across the paper, a fluid movement is inscribed in the piece through the dynamic and expressive lines, a visual activity that strains against the stillness of the form to figure the physical force of the refugees' displacement. This analysis suggests that O. Udechukwu uses linear *uli* motifs to vividly render the embodied experiences of those exiled during and in the wake of the war; to capture, in condensed visual terms, the essential elements of their flight as well as their humanity. O. Udechukwu's utilisation of various motifs from the *uli* pantheon can therefore be read as resisting the marginalisation that former Biafrans suffered after the war. Indeed, the positive line works to represent and articulate their stories. From the people forced to flee the massacres in the north to those displaced during and after the conflict, the spiralling lines work to express and, crucially, *navigate* these legacies of the Biafran crisis.



Stephen Clingman's theorisation of navigation helps to further nuance my analysis of O. Udechukwu's *uli*-inflected practice. As noted in the previous chapter, Clingman casts movement as an important conceptual tool in processes of identity and meaning making. The theorist asserts: "Navigation, whether internal, external, or linking the two, cannot be thought or conceived without the boundary. This is the central paradox at the heart of a transitive imagination: *navigation occurs not despite but because of the boundary*" (Clingman 21, italics in original). The idea of a 'transitive imagination' links to Clingman's broader reading of identity as a grammatical formation: "[t]he syntax of the self – its combinatory, unfolding possibilities – is a transitive syntax" (16).

While this formulation broadly supports my reading of the complex and sensitive figuring of exile in the artworks of the Nsukka group, Clingman's theory of navigation can also be usefully applied to the specific aesthetic and socio-historical make-up of O. Udechukwu's *The Exiles*. Indeed, the expressive lines that cover the woodcut reflect the transitive trajectory and impulse that Clingman theorises, particularly his assertion that "[t]here is no meaning without *space*, or the gap between meanings[. O]ut of these gaps and differences, according to the generative capacities of syntax, a form of navigation takes place, allowing the miracle of utterance and expression" (22, italics in original). This suggests that while the positive lines portrayed in *The Exiles* work to inscribe the lived experience of people affected by the Biafran crisis, that presence is always held in tension with, and enabled by, the historical and aesthetic absences and boundaries that also constitute the woodcut.

This reading resonates with another important stylistic aspect of the *uli* aesthetic. As Okeke-Agulu puts it (as C. Okeke), "there is the tendency to deploy compositional elements in a manner that engages the surrounding space(s) in a formal dialogue. In other words, 'negative' space in a composition is considered a pictorial element" (*Critical Interventions* 15). The negative space in *The Exiles* should therefore be seen as producing a form of aesthetic equilibrium in the work. It balances the lived presences of the exiles – represented through

the positive line – with the loss of their homeland and security, and with the absence of others who have and will go on to be displaced by the crisis. This nuanced dynamic is reinforced by the faded, even spectral quality of *The Exiles*. On the one hand, this could be the result of the relief printing process. If multiple copies were produced in quick succession then the images printed on later versions might have become fainter if the ink was not repeatedly refreshed. On the other hand, when the work is studied closely it becomes clear that the spectral ambience of *The Exiles* is at least partly the result of the many thin, horizontal marks that cover and break-up the thicker lines, suggesting that this effect was deliberately produced by O. Udechukwu as he cut into the wood before beginning the ink transfer. This stylistic effect powerfully evokes the ‘unknown’, hazy future facing these refugees, and reinscribes the haunting force and absence of the Biafran revenant in Nigeria’s post-war cultural landscape. Indeed, the collection of moving lines that construct *The Exiles* not only renders a specific and personal experience of the crisis. They also encompass and navigate various kinds of conceptual, political and material boundaries that are implicated in the conflict.

O. Udechukwu’s rendering of the war’s spectral significance in *The Exiles* resonates with contemporary debates about the state of the Nigerian federation and the possibility of another secession. Marking the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the conflict in July 2017, Soyinka published an essay which ruminates over the enduring question of Biafra. Soyinka asks: “Should Biafra stay in, or opt out of Nigeria? That is the latent question. Even after years of turbulent co-tenancy, it seems unreal to conceive of a Nigeria without Biafra” (“War in Nigeria” para. 16). Soyinka suggests that while the relationship between the state constructions of Nigeria and Biafra has always been fraught, this legacy of charged co-dependency may in fact be a necessary and positive force within the federation. He adds: “The West African region is marked by an intersection of horizontally and vertically-formed groupings and identities, the result of colonial intervention in the race for territory. The result

has proved often dispiriting but just as often stimulating” (Soyinka, “War in Nigeria” para. 17). The language of linearity used by Soyinka to convey the overlapping and charged vectors of geography, identity and narrative at play in the West African region – and in the legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war more specifically – is indicative of the intricate and expressive concatenation lines that O. Udechukwu, as both a Nigerian and a Biafran, renders in his creative responses to the conflict. The very fact that O. Udechukwu uses the word ‘unknown’ to describe the situation facing the figures in his woodcut, as well as in a number of his subsequent works that I now turn to, attests to the generative complexity of the issue.

### **3.4 Transitional and transnational navigations**

Although linear aesthetics have undoubtedly dominated O. Udechukwu’s visual art practice throughout his career, the forms that those graphic expressions have taken have evolved numerous times. Okeke-Agulu, for one, notes several distinct phases in the artist’s visual work: “If the 1970s was the decade of pen and ink, and the 1980s of ink and wash, the 1990s saw him begin a long withdrawal from ink and the primacy of the elegant line, such that by the 2000s he all but restricted himself to graphite as his drawing medium” (*Obiora Udechukwu* 21). While this broad historical schema of O. Udechukwu’s art helps to highlight key aesthetic shifts in his visual oeuvre, it can also be used to pinpoint moments when the artist’s responses to Biafra have undergone distinctive transformations. Such a development is perceivable in the painting *Journey into the Unknown* (1989) (see Figure 9).



Fig. 9. Obiora Udechukwu, *Journey into the Unknown*, 1989, ink on paper. H x W: 48 x 36 cm. Gift of Bernice M. Kelly. © Obiora Udechukwu. Photograph by Franko Khoury, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Created in the late 1980s during the artist's ink and wash period, this artwork engages with the questions of exile and displacement already foregrounded in *The Exiles*. The central figure wears a striped wrapper and wide-brimmed hat comparable to those which dress the taller person depicted in *The Exiles*. Another connection between the two works can be seen in the celestial motif that dominates the top left-hand area of *Journey into the Unknown*, which indexes the setting or eclipse of Biafra's rising sun through the invocation of both lunar and solar imagery. Direct references to Biafra and the war form only a small part of the image, however. The sword and the rifle motifs in the left half of the central band of motifs that

cover the figure's wrapper connote ideas of violence and warfare, while the snaking line of abstract human shapes positioned in the extreme right of the band evokes the 'exile train' that captured O. Udechukwu's imagination during the war.<sup>46</sup> So although O. Udechukwu depicts identifiably Biafran imagery and references various forms of displacement in both *The Exiles* and *Journey into the Unknown*, a key distinction can be drawn between the contrasting scales of engagement with the conflict in these artworks. This suggests that as the decades pass and new crises come to the fore, the Biafran conflict's historical and cultural significance undergoes imaginative augmentation for O. Udechukwu, producing alternative morphologies of the struggle in his art. Indeed, in contrast to the woodcut studied in the earlier section, *Journey into the Unknown* offers a more abstract – and less contextually specific – navigation of Biafra's exilic legacies.

In Clingman's account of navigation as a form of transitive syntax that produces meaning by negotiating boundaries between ideas and spaces, the theorist goes on to assert:

[I]t is the transition across these boundaries that produces meaning, and where meaning is not complete or is deferred, then further navigations are both invited and required. [...] And so the boundary is also a horizon, a destination never quite reached, like the boundary of the world. [N]avigation depends on, and creates, the transitive boundary which may itself undergo change. (22)

Clingman not only suggests that navigation produces meaning by negotiating boundaries in this quotation. He also contends that it transforms the very boundaries which it traverses. As such, the idea of navigation helps to theorise the evolution of O. Udechukwu's linear response to Biafra and other artistic mediations of the crisis. Indeed, building on my argument in the previous chapter that Nigerian artists of various stripes have foregrounded the instability of the war's historical as well as aesthetic frames through processes of

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<sup>46</sup> In *Obiora Udechukwu: Image, Line, Text*, Okeke-Agulu reproduces dozens of sketches and paintings produced by O. Udechukwu in the 1970s and 1980s that portray groups of refugee and exiled figures carrying belongings comparable to those represented in *Journey into the Unknown*. While many of these works are untitled, such as the set of pictures from 1971 numbered 173, 174, 175, 176 (all reproduced on p. 145 of *Obiora Udechukwu*), and the 1982 watercolour numbered 282 (printed on p. 209), O. Udechukwu's thematic preoccupation with dispossession and displacement is perceivable in them all.

formfooling, I contend that Biafra functions as an affectively charged and transitional boundary in O. Udechukwu's work that he continually reimagines and repurposes. *Journey into the Unknown* shows the artist conjuring Biafra as a constitutive element within the broader evocation of Nigerian history, which has involved multiple kinds of political displacement, rather than as a distinctive moment of expulsion from Nigeria, such as *The Exiles'* portrayal of the mass movement of Igbo people in 1966. Moreover, O. Udechukwu's depiction of Biafra as one part of a larger historical and aesthetic whole in *Journey into the Unknown* is taken further in his later painting *Our Journey* (1993) (see Figure 10), which visually inscribes Igbo and Nigerian history within the body of the yellow royal python that weaves across the four panels of the work.



Fig. 10. Obiora Udechukwu, *Our Journey*, 1993, ink and acrylic on stretched canvas (4 panels). H x W: 200 x 640 cm. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through a gift from Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H, by exchange; 2017.23. © Obiora Udechukwu.

Within the body of the python, which also represents “the road of life” (Ottenberg 145) in Igbo cosmology, O. Udechukwu composes motifs that express different moments in the country's history, from the precolonial period to the Biafran crisis. In Ottenberg's analysis of the painting, the anthropologist notes:

In the right panel it has [...] a few traditional Igbo designs but is largely empty, as if representing the journey's birth, that of the Nigerian and Igbo people. The band in the second panel from the right has traditional elements: combs, a mask, mirrors [...]. The next band to the left draws on the Biafran war with the theme of patience, a chameleon, refugees, images of lack of water [...]. The leftmost band shows people sitting, a woman with a mirror, a military man pointing a gun. (145–6)

Significant in terms of O. Udechukwu's evolving portrayal of the charged and blurred boundary between Biafra and Nigeria is the way the Biafran conflict appears to be consolidated within a broader visual narrative of collective transition in *Our Journey*, which shows it extending the process of recontextualisation previously undertaken in *Journey into the Unknown*. The diminished emphasis given to Biafran imagery in the two 'journey' works as opposed to *The Exiles* suggests that as O. Udechukwu's career progresses, he increasingly incorporates the war into a longer socio-cultural trajectory whereby Nigeria's post-war development represents one of many historical resonances. Given that *Our Journey* was produced in 1993, it surely responds to the period of intense instability in Nigeria caused by the annulment of that year's democratic election by the military leader General Ibrahim Babangida, which the political scientist and anthropologist Wale Adebaniwi describes as "set[ting] off a national crisis that was only second to the civil war" (150). That O. Udechukwu redeploys Biafran imagery in order to respond to this precarious political moment serves to reiterate its creative malleability and residual significance. Indeed, O. Udechukwu's 1993 work powerfully underscores the central argument of this thesis by illustrating how generative and salient Biafra's legacies have been for artists since the end of the war.

O. Udechukwu's creative intervention in debates about the position of former Biafrans within the Nigerian polity – which, as Soyinka notes, revolves around the question of whether they should remain within the state or abandon it – is grounded in Nigeria's developing post-war situation. However, O. Udechukwu's practice also comprises various transnational significances and traditions. As the artist puts it in an essay: "I am open to using ideas or media from anywhere to advance my own work. For me, tradition is complex, flexible, and multilayered" (O. Udechukwu, "Notes from the Field" 29). This quotation shows O. Udechukwu contesting readings of 'tradition' as a rigid or fossilised cultural

resource, and indeed he has synthesised a number of different aesthetic lexicons during his career.

In addition to drawing from the *uli* pantheon in his visual art, O. Udechukwu has also explored the *nsibidi* writing script, which is a linear mode of expression and communication developed by secret societies in the Igbo-Ibibio-Ekoi borderlands (O. Udechukwu, “An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu” 64). O. Udechukwu has, moreover, utilised techniques from further afield, for example the Chinese painting style known as *li*, which is one facet of a broader philosophical commitment to order and harmony in Chinese belief. As Lin Yutang suggests, the concept of *li* expresses “the inner nature of things and of the universe itself, and is equivalent to ‘inner law’ and structure governing a thing’s form and behaviour” (qtd. in Okeke-Agulu, *Obiora Udechukwu* 287).

The transnational influences of *li* and *nsibidi* can be perceived in both *Journey into the Unknown* and *Our Journey*. In *Journey into the Unknown*, *li* is clearly invoked in the diaphanous and gauzy ink wash that fills the crescent/moon motif. As Okeke-Agulu perceptively argues, these areas of ink add an “atmospheric orchestration” (*Obiora Udechukwu* 20) to O. Udechukwu’s work “that can [...] invoke the nocturnal” (20). They also show the artist visually interrogating the inner nature of the ‘unknown’ destination of the central figure, underlining his reconceptualisation of Biafra as one part of a broader historical and imaginative whole. Shifting and undulating areas of ink also constitute a significant portion of *Our Journey*, with various sections of rippling, chromatic paint surrounding the central form of the royal python. O. Udechukwu also includes *nsibidi* symbols in the painting, for example the mirror motif that hangs above the python in the right half of the work. Simon P. X. Battestini suggests that in O. Udechukwu’s system of representation, the *nsibidi* mirror motif refers to “self-criticism, to social-criticism, and therefore as an adjuvant for the first necessary steps before making progress” (76). The motif’s placement in *Our Journey* shows the artist creatively reflecting on the history that is expressed in the body of the royal python.



Furthermore, as the mirror symbol is located outside of the main body of the python form, it also implies that new perspectives on events such as the Biafran crisis can only be generated at a certain spatiotemporal remove; when they are viewed as part of a broader trajectory of historical evolution and transition.

In line with this analysis of the various cultural influences at play in O. Udechukwu's art, Clingman suggests that "[t]ransition turns the global into the transnational" (241) because it does not render difference static and immutable. Indeed, he further asserts that "difference is not the barrier but the space of crossing, where navigation is essential to the story we wish to become" (Clingman 241). O. Udechukwu certainly does not offer a clear cut or simplistic vision of the story he produces through his engagement with Biafra's legacies. Rather, the war's evolving implications and complexities, which span transnational as well as political and aesthetic spheres, are invoked with profound force by the artist. O. Udechukwu's dynamic, navigating lines not only function at different registers – invoking stillness and movement, presence and absence – they also work to bring balance to them. As such, O. Udechukwu's post-war engagement with exile, which utilises the *uli* idiom and other forms, should be viewed as a highly sensitive response to Biafra and as an aestheticisation of the transitive legacies of the war. By rendering and responding to Biafra's exilic legacies as an imaginative threshold as well as a socio-historical boundary, O. Udechukwu instantiates a transnational art practice capable of making visible, navigable and malleable the limits imposed by changing politics and histories. And now, to gain a fuller sense of the artist's multimedia response to Biafra, I explore the poetics of his and others' linear and literary outputs.

### 3.5 Multimedia articulations across the Nsukka group

Okeke-Agulu argues that one way of describing O. Udechukwu is as a "poet *of* drawing" (*Obiora Udechukwu* 19, italics in original), an idea which he takes from Achebe's earlier

assertion that “Udechukwu is the poet of the clean and eloquent line” (qtd. in Okeke-Agulu, *Obiora Udechukwu* 13). This definition not only reflects the way O. Udechukwu’s linear art took on an increasingly lyrical quality from the mid-1970s onwards, but also invokes the influence of the poet Christopher Okigbo on his visual art and poetry. Okigbo was a passionate supporter of Biafra’s secession and, after secretly enlisting in the Biafran army, was killed in action in August 1967 (Achebe, *There Was a Country* 184). While he was already an established poet at the time of his death, the fact that he chose to head to the frontline during the war rather than contribute to the Biafran cause by other means – which was the case with artists like Achebe and O. Udechukwu – has led to him being mythologised as a martyr figure who sacrificed his art for the Biafran nation. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it, “he has become THE most talked about poet of his generation, a cult hero whose life, death and work remain passionate subjects for many African intellectuals” (Adichie, “Okigbo: An Introduction” x). The poet’s influence on O. Udechukwu is graphically expressed in the ink drawing *Moonman* (1974) (see Figure 11), which featured prominently in the artist’s first solo exhibition, *Homage to Christopher Okigbo* (1975).

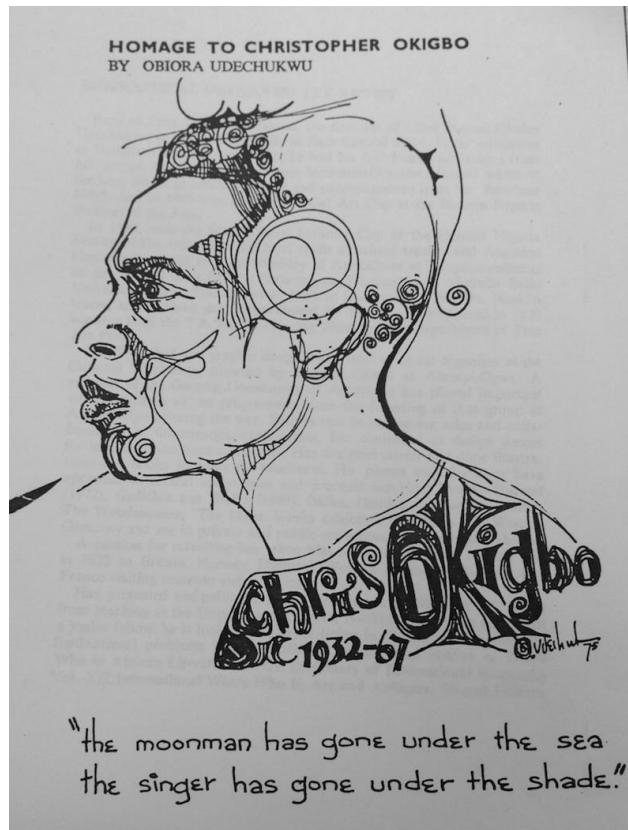


Fig. 11. Obiora Udechukwu, *Moonman*, 1974, ink, from the *Homage to Christopher Okigbo* exhibition catalogue, 1975. © Obiora Udechukwu. Photograph by Matthew Lecznar.

O. Udechukwu's linear portrait of the poet also includes a graphic rendering of two lines from Okigbo's poem "Transition", which forms the fifth movement of his longer poem *Heavensgate* (1962). The text serves to demonstrate Okigbo's significance for O. Udechukwu's art, who first encountered the poet in Enugu, at a gathering of the local Mbari group of artists (Udechukwu, "An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu" 65). Mbari clubs, which were first set up in Ibadan in 1961 with the help of the German cultural patron and educator Ulli Beier, acted as dynamic spaces for debate and performance between artists (Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism* 149). In a later interview with Beier, Udechukwu suggests that the turning point in his poetry "came in 1967 during the war, when Okigbo died. [...] After that I started writing consistently" ("An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu" 65). The *Moonman* portrait of Okigbo is thus significant for the way it shows O. Udechukwu vividly invoking

the memory of the late poet, who had a major impact on the younger artist's multimedia practice.

In terms of the detail of the *Moonman* drawing, O. Udechukwu employs *agwologwo* motifs in it to portray Okigbo's hair in a way comparable to those perceived in his earlier woodcut *The Exiles*. These linear designs are rendered more dynamically in *Moonman*, with a variety of tight and expansive coils combining to represent the features of the poet's face. The spirals in the portrait also stretch beyond Okigbo's image and embellish the letters that construct his name. Furthermore, the graphic form of *Moonman*, which is comparable to the fluid linearity of *Journey into the Unknown*, is indicative of O. Udechukwu's increasing dexterity as a draughtsman and his desire to capture the force and lyricism of Okigbo's poetic voice. In the interview with Beier, O. Udechukwu agrees that he was attracted by the musicality of Okigbo's poetry, a lyricism which he and other *uli* artists have sought to translate into visual form using the undulating lines of the *uli* form. As the Nsukka artist and art historian Chike Aniakor reveals, *uli* symbols are also inscribed with a vital and expressive lyrical resonance:

At its best, Uli is the rhythmic temper of line like a melodic note plucked from the thumb piano [...]. In Uli, the line dances, spirals into diverse shapes, elongates, attenuates, thickens, swells and slides [...], leaving an empty space that sustains it with mute echoes by which silence is part of sound. (Aniakor qtd. in Okeke-Agulu, *Obiora Udechukwu* 286)

Earlier I noted that there is a balance of positive and negative space in *uli* aesthetics, and suggested that O. Udechukwu uses this aspect of the form to inscribe the experiences of those exiled by the war as well as to navigate the complex terrain of post-war Nigeria. Aniakor's definition adds another dimension to this formulation, demonstrating that the line in *uli* also has melodic qualities: it balances sound with silence as well as presence with absence.

While Aniakor's definition appears to support Okeke-Agulu's portrayal of O. Udechukwu as a graphic poet, this interpretation risks conflating all of the artist's creations as merely 'poetic', and of glossing over the considerable nuances that exist between the

different modes of practice he employs. As already noted, the poetry that O. Udechukwu includes in *Moonman* is taken from a verse in Okigbo's oeuvre: "the moonman has gone under the sea / the singer has gone under the shade". These lines certainly express the musical qualities of the poet's writings and allude to his transition from life to death during the war, but the negative space between the quoted verse and the graphic portrait functions as a barrier as well as an opening or connection. While I agree that O. Udechukwu brings Okigbo's poetry into dialogue with his visual aesthetics in this work, I want to nuance the assumption that they necessarily function in the same way. Indeed, O. Udechukwu deliberately separates the graphic image and the text on the page. To elucidate this compositional choice, which I suggest shows O. Udechukwu foregrounding the differences as well as confluences between his visual and poetic practices, I now turn to one of the artist's early post-war poems.

#### RETURN OF THE EXILES

in the wake of the whirlwind  
     a woman stood in silence  
         beneath aborted telegraph wires

a woman in black  
     probing the avenue of ruins and giant grass

a woman in black  
     before the beheaded palms

the birds are singing again,  
     singing home the exiles

the land is humming a dirge  
     humming home the fallen

the whirlwind is over  
     and the exiles return  
     but they have no shelter from the rains.  
 (O. Udechukwu, *Nsukeke Harvest* 8)

As with O. Udechukwu's visual explorations of Biafra's exilic legacies, there is a focus on linearity in this verse. References to roads, avenues and telegraph wires pepper the poem,

while another correspondence can be perceived in the balance the verse strikes between tropes of movement and stillness, silence and music, exile and return. In the first three lines, stillness and movement are juxtaposed; the “woman in black” (O. Udechukwu, *Nsukka Harvest* 8) is portrayed as standing “in silence” (8) in response to “the whirlwind” (8) of the Biafran conflict.<sup>47</sup> This static figure is subsequently animated when she starts “probing the avenues of ruins” (O. Udechukwu, *Nsukka Harvest* 8): a motion that is reflected in the layout of the poem. A spatial shift attends each of the first twelve lines of the poem, evoking the continual displacement of the exiles and the whirlwind of the war. Furthermore, the woman’s silent response to the devastation is given a musical resonance through the descriptions of the singing birds and humming land, which call “home the exiles” (O. Udechukwu, *Nsukka Harvest* 8). While the exiles’ return corresponds with a change in the spatial arrangement of lines in the last stanza of the poem – the progressive and shifting indentations of the earlier lines give way to spatial uniformity – the final line undermines claims that the returnees from Biafra were rehabilitated in the war’s aftermath. Indeed, it is proclaimed that the exiles have been given “no shelter from the rains” (*Nsukka Harvest* 8). This reading of “Return of the Exiles” lays out some of the aesthetic confluences between O. Udechukwu’s visual art and poetry, which I want to further elucidate by engaging with Stuart Hall’s conception of articulation.

As I noted in the introduction, Hall sees the idea of ‘articulation’ as useful to cultural studies in two senses. On the one hand, it “carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing” (Hall 141) which is crucial in processes of discourse formation. On the other hand, and by extension, ‘articulation’ is the very process through which such disparate elements become connected (Hall 141):

An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. [...] So the so-called ‘unity’ of a

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<sup>47</sup> The artist has revealed that the poem “was spontaneously written on the road in 1970” (O. Udechukwu, “Poetry and Art of the Nsukka School” 164) after he returned to a devastated Nsukka at the end of the war.

discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. (Hall 141, *italics in original*)

I find Hall's dual definition of articulation suggestive for my study of O. Udechukwu's multimedia arts. By foregrounding the way modes and moments of conjuncture between diffuse elements work to undergird broader unities, it resonates with the artist's evolving aestheticisation of Biafra through various, but not necessarily connected, modes of expression at particular moments in the post-war period. As Hall further asserts, "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (141–2). As this notion of articulation highlights the contingency of aesthetic as well as political-ideological expressions and modalities, it becomes necessary to think more deeply about how artists use different media forms to articulate particular visions and versions of Biafra and its legacies. As a way of situating O. Udechukwu's work in broader developments amongst the Nsukka group's multimedia practice, a comparison with the creative work of A. Udechukwu is relevant at this stage.

Formerly Ada Obi, the artist studied at Nsukka in the 1980s, although on the English literature programme rather than in the Art department. As with her husband Obiora, a strong sense of the transnational and transitional also permeates A. Udechukwu's art, which spans painterly, poetic and textile forms. However, as noted earlier, there is a marked contrast between the pair in terms of their relationships to and creative engagements with Biafra. Indeed, a major point of difference can be perceived in A. Udechukwu's experience of the violent struggle. The daughter of an Igbo Nigerian father and American-born mother, A. Udechukwu was a young child when Nigeria's civil crisis erupted in the late 1960s. Her parents decided to relocate their family to the US in 1967, and they returned to Nigeria in

1970 after Biafra's capitulation (Ottenberg 203–4). Ottenberg argues that A. Udechukwu's time in the US "led to an enrichment of both her life and her art, but also to conflicts over her cultural identity" (204). Despite the purported significance of A. Udechukwu's dislocation from Nigeria during the war years, Ottenberg further asserts that "neither her visual art nor her poetry reflects it" (204). While it is true that the Biafran war is not rendered in an explicit way in many of her creations, the fact that the conflict produced the circumstances from which her sense of cultural inbetweenness developed suggests that Biafra is more significant for A. Udechukwu's art than Ottenberg's account allows.

A. Udechukwu explores the tensions and pressures of living between different cultural identities in the ink and brush painting titled *In Between* (1994) (see Figure 12).

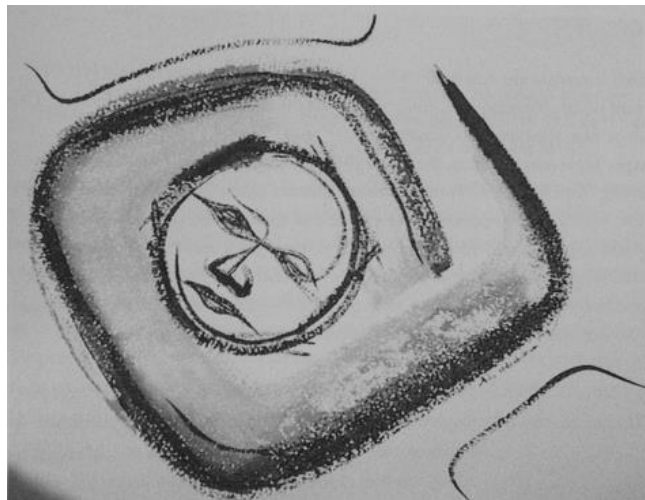


Fig. 12. Ada Udechukwu, 1994, *In Between*, ink brush on paper. H x W: 22.8 x 30.5 cm. © Ada Udechukwu.

In the painting, the thick line of ink that encircles the face motif – which has been fluidly applied by the artist and pulled in with water to create a blurring effect – appears to have a mediating function. Acting as a porous boundary and a threshold between the central face and the smaller lines positioned at the top and bottom right of the work, the dynamic line navigates the distance between these different shapes. Moreover, recalling the abstract qualities of the *uli* aesthetic practice, this navigating line also arguably mediates the tensions within the artist's sense of identity. Indeed, the spiralling form of the blurry and



circumnavigating line in *In Between* recalls the *agvolagwo* motif employed throughout O. Udechukwu's artistic responses to Biafra, suggesting that A. Udechukwu is obliquely engaging with the war's exilic legacies in the painting. Such a sense of Biafra's subtle influence is also conveyed in the artist's poem "ride me, memories", which textually expresses memory using a painterly lexicon.

[...]  
 I feel your presence  
 here  
 in eventide's calm  
 All rises are one brushstroke of memory  
 imprinted in brief instant border  
 between  
 then  
 and  
 now  
 [...] (A. Udechukwu, "ride me, memories" *Woman, Me*)

As with *In Between*, Biafra is not explicitly invoked in this extract. However, the verse does show A. Udechukwu drawing from a visual vocabulary to articulate mnemonic meanings in poetic form. In "ride me, memories", the figure of the brushstroke both represents and mediates memory, acting as a porous and navigating border between different times and spaces. The structure of the poem also resembles a fluid, shifting line, which again recalls O. Udechukwu's utilisation of the poetic genre in "Return of the Exiles", although in more measured and minimalist terms. So, while *In Between* and "ride me, memories" do not engage with Biafra's legacies in an explicit way, these visual and poetic compositions traverse different aesthetic modes to express her experiences of dislocation engendered by the conflict. This suggests that the war need not be overtly referenced in art for its influence to be felt. Moreover, the clear contrasts in the Udechukwus' multimedia arts are indicative of broader variations among the practices and philosophies of other members of the Nsukka group.

During a symposium that preceded the 1997 launch of an exhibition of works by several Nsukka artists at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in

Washington D.C., there was a roundtable discussion that included artists such as the Udechukwu and a number of art critics. The discussion centred on the question of whether the multimedia outputs of the Nsukka school mark it out as exceptional within the historical development of modern African art. The dialogue is reproduced in *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art* (2002), and some of the contributors, notably Olu Oguibe, assert that the group's varied multimedia aesthetics render them a singular phenomenon, one which developed out of the art school's teaching programme ("Poetry and Art of the Nsukka School" 170). Others, such as O. Udechukwu, argue that such a focus on disciplinarity masks the fact that in many traditional African cultures, no clear distinction is drawn between different forms of creation and performance: "in the traditional set-up everybody is a poet, everybody is a dancer, everybody is an artist, and it depends on the level of proficiency" (O. Udechukwu, "Poetry and Art of the Nsukka School" 166). This view resonates with F. Abiola Irele's account of orality, which he defines as "the fundamental reference of discourse and of the imaginative mode in Africa" (11):

Whereas writing decontextualizes and discarnates, orality demonstrates the contextual dimension of communication and restores the full scope of imaginative expression, which writing in its reductive tendency cannot capture or even adequately represent. Thus, orality proposes a dynamic conception of literature, one that envisages literature as *text in situation*.

It is no longer, then, a question of considering oral literature as verbal art but as a totality that conjoins communication and participation in the affective field of a communal event. (37, italics in original)

Given that O. Udechukwu's "Return of the Exiles" poem was published in May 1970 in a printed record of a poetry reading organised by the University of Nigeria's Writers' Club, Irele's formulation of orality as proposing a dynamic vision of "*text in situation*" (37, italics in original) and as a "communal event" (37) seems to accurately reflect the artist's intention for the poem to be performed rather than simply read. Indeed, the poet and critic Ezenwa-Ohaeto provides further contextual support for this view by noting that there was an "evolution of modern Nigerian poetry in the seventies and eighties [which moved the form]

towards a people-oriented creativity” (245). Ezenwa-Ohaeto contends that this development was driven by a desire among poets “to make more people enjoy poetry” (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 245) regardless of their background: a move away from the syntactically and referentially complex verses of previous generations of Nigerian poets – produced by figures such as Soyinka and Okigbo – which Ezenwa-Ohaeto suggests has also contributed to the “current vogue in live performances” (259). However, returning to Irele’s celebratory account of orality as representing a “totality” (37) of African creative expression, his argument is undermined by his insistence that writing “cannot capture or even adequately represent” (37) the fullness of this communal event. While Irele persuasively suggests that a “tense area of signification [...] lies between the native traditions of imaginative expression and the European literary tradition” (13), the Udechukwu’s text-based poems do not simply defer to the oral: they also creatively interrogate poetry’s textual and graphic potentialities in the aftermath of Biafra.

Writing certainly reduces the fullness of embodied experience. However, as suggested earlier, this is an important facet of the traditional *uli* aesthetic so central to both the Udechukwu’s arts. Indeed, rather than delimiting the Udechukwu’s artistic sensibilities, these lexical as well as visual forms, which produce clarified and distinctive representations of peoples affected by Biafra, demonstrate that the connection between art and the wider population is not a given but something that must be forged. As O. Udechukwu has described the war as a “shattering kind of experience” (“An Interview” 63), his and A. Udechukwu’s multimodal aesthetics open up spaces where new forms of artistic, political and ethical connection can be forged, or rather articulated, in the face of ruination. To further clarify these observations, I now turn to the exilic explorations of other Nsukka artists, principally those by Ndidi Dike and Olu Oguibe, whose mixed media arts powerfully articulate the political as well as creative contingency of Biafran mediations.

### 3.6 Biafra in Ndid Dike's critical art

As noted earlier in the chapter, Dike was living in the UK when Biafra seceded from Nigeria. Having grown up away from her ancestral home, she subsequently moved back to Nigeria with her family after the war, and has been based there ever since. During her career, Dike has been active in foregrounding the politics that influence and are expressed by her art, particularly as a means of criticising the Nigerian government and highlighting the damaging effects of gender inequality on the country's art scene. In my analysis of Dike's artistic responses to the Nigeria-Biafra war, I argue that by emphasising the transitional and unknowable in her mixed media practice – valences which relate to the form, content and politics of the pieces – Dike expresses an aesthetic-ethics that is symptomatic of the work of the Nsukka group more broadly. Conceiving of her work in terms of ideas of transition and unknowability, this section offers a richer sense of the generative and oblique force of the Biafran war as a creative and sensitising touchstone for these practitioners.

Despite being one of the most acclaimed graduates of the Nsukka school, there has been a tendency for critics to diminish the significance of Dike's work within discussions of the Nsukka group and Nigerian art history more broadly. As Ogbachie argues, while Dike is “[t]he first and most successful female sculptor to emerge from the Nsukka School” (“Ndid Dike” 27), she has “been marginalized in the narratives of Nsukka Uli revivalism, [and] has weathered an active campaign by critics who dismiss her work as imitative and unsophisticated” (27). Moreover, as I noted earlier in the chapter, Nzegwu has been forthright in criticising the way male artists of the Nsukka group have appropriated the historically feminine artistic tradition of *uli*. Exploring the consequences of this male dominance on the critical reception of Dike's sculptural art, Nzegwu contends:

There is no question that Dike's appropriation of sculpture raises the important issue of men's modern domination of social relations and their appropriation of activities such as *uli* that were historically in the female domain. In a certain sense, Dike is specifically questioning why boundary crossings are seen as legitimate and proper

for men, while women's counter crossings are policed and represented as deviant.  
(121)

For Nzegwu, Dike's work in sculpture – historically circumscribed as a male art in Igbo culture – lays bare the gender inequalities and masculinisation of Nigerian art by appropriating a form traditionally denied to women. Indeed, Dike's art grapples with a process of gender subversion and performativity that anticipates Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In it, Butler contends that “[g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (*Gender Trouble* 140, italics in original). Butler asserts that these repeated social performances function as a strategy for reinforcing the idea of essential gender identities. However, she also argues that through this performative process, fissures open up in identity constructions which can be converted into forms of resistance: “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141). Although Butler does not engage with the particular gender politics of Igbo or Nigerian societies, her analysis is useful in navigating the complex contours of Dike's practice and the wider significance of identity issues for the Nsukka group. Indeed, it lends a gendered dimension to the formfooling modality explored in the previous chapter.

Nzegwu's work on Igbo cultural history provides further contextual depth for a reading of gender transformation in Dike's art. Nzegwu argues that “Igbo society lacked the sort of patriarchal attitudes that stem from Christian and Moslem gender norms. Historically, such gender codes were not a part of Igbo cultural life, nor was the society the patriarchal culture it is made out to be” (120). This account of the “the conceptual flexibility of Igbo

gender identity” (Nzegwu 106), which Nzegwu argues is crucial to Dike’s practice, corresponds with Ifi Amadiume’s study of the subject in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987). In Amadiume’s historical analysis of Igbo gender identities and politics, the scholar asserts that “[t]he flexibility of Igbo gender construction meant that gender was separate from biological sex. Daughters could become sons and consequently male” (*Male Daughters* 15). Nzegwu’s and Amadiume’s writings suggest that Dike’s art should not only be viewed as transgressing and transforming gender norms as they stand in the early twenty-first century, but that it also engages with a long tradition of complex gender relations in Igbo cultures. While I find Nzegwu’s argument about the gender politics of Dike’s art persuasive – and I return to the subject of transgressive and queering Biafran arts in the next chapter – it tends to reduce the conceptual and imaginative dynamism of the artist’s practice to the singular issue of gender. In order to complicate this view, I now consider the way the artist’s engagements with Biafra nuance readings of the complex developments and potentialities of the war’s cultural aftermath.

Although Biafra rarely features explicitly in Dike’s sculptures, paintings and installations, this lack of overt allusion – which could be seen to reflect her biographical distance from the conflict – is overturned in two mixed media pieces created in 2014 (see Figures 13 and 14).



Fig. 13. Ndidi Dike, *Untitled*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, photocopies from historical records, polyurethane print, shredded paper. H x W: 182.88 x 137.16 cm. © Ndidi Dike.



Fig. 14. Ndidi Dike, *Untitled*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, photocopies from historical records, polyurethane print, shredded paper. H x W: 182.88 x 137.16 cm. © Ndidi Dike.

In these works, currently untitled, Dike produces a collage of heterogeneous media made up of photocopies of Biafran money, newspaper articles, political pamphlets, propaganda images and photographs of military leaders and soldiers. By repurposing a variety of images and text produced during the war period, Dike arguably engages in what the theorist Jacques Rancière calls ‘critical art’.

Indeed, as I noted in the thesis’s introduction, Rancière’s account of the politics of aesthetics highlights the oppositional logic underpinning works of art: “the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all” (83). This double movement, which drives art to engage with its political context even as it attempts to forswear it, is both expressed and interrogated in pieces of critical art. He adds:

Critical art must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards ‘life’ and which, conversely, separates aesthetic sensoriality from other forms of sensual experience. It must borrow the connections that provoke political intelligibility from the blurry zone between art and other spheres. And it must borrow the sense of sensible heterogeneity that feeds the political energies of refusal from the isolation of the work of art. (Rancière 84)

Rancière argues that a critical art emerges through the inscription and mediation of heterogeneous connections, which are to be found in the spaces between art and its others. In this way, his work resonates with Butler’s account of the frames – aesthetic, political and otherwise – that construct grievable as well as precarious lives. It is, moreover, Rancière’s vision of the charged relationship between the framing of aesthetic and political spheres that make his theories useful to other analyses of West African cultural traditions. For example, in *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (2013), Kenneth W. Harrow draws from Rancière’s writings to push back against binary accounts of African cinema, which Harrow argues tend to treat film industries like Nollywood as being either artistically or politically committed, but rarely both (31).



In terms of elucidating Dike's mixed media engagements with Biafra, Rancière's analysis of different modes of installation art is particularly useful. Specifically, the theorist's conception of the inventory form of installation art can be used to interpret her untitled pieces as cataloguing diffuse material remnants from the war, which work to creatively reinscribe and memorialise Biafra. For Rancière, an inventory involves "[a]ssembling heterogeneous materials[, which] becomes a positive memory [...]. Primarily it's an inventory of historical traces: objects, photographs or simply lists of names that witness a shared history or a shared world" (89). Such a formulation echoes Edward W. Said's invocation of the idea of the inventory in the introduction to *Orientalism* (1978). Recalling Antonio Gramsci's assertion that critical work requires an engagement with the "infinity of traces" (qtd. in Said, *Orientalism* 25) that comprise a person's history and consciousness, Said asserts that his "study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon [him]" (25). In this vein, Dike's untitled works arguably engage in processes of both collective and personal archiving, representing remnants of Biafra in unfamiliar ways. Indeed, the combination of sporadically positioned banknotes, photographs and press clippings, and the textured strips of shredded paper that cover the works, have the effect of invoking the rich multidimensionality of Biafra's mnemonic significance.

More specifically, Dike's repurposing of Biafran currency as collage pieces arguably instantiate a reflexive response to Rancière's assertion that heterogeneous collage unveils the "capitalist violence behind the happiness of consumption; market interest and violent class struggle behind the apparent serenity of art" (87). Indeed, Nigeria's economic blockade of Biafra was a crucial facet of the attritional war that produced the terrible famine in enclave and eventually led to the state's surrender. In this way, Dike's striking repurposing of Biafran currency gestures to the suffering that economic sanctions caused in the enclave. In his analysis of the economic dimension of the conflict, E. Wayne Nafziger notes that after Biafra seceded in May 1967,

[t]he Federal Government reacted by severing communication and postal services to Biafra, officially banning foreign-exchange transactions, and imposing a limited economic blockade on Biafran ports. In July the blockade, which was effectively enforced by Nigeria's small navy, became total when it was extended to oil tankers. (226)

The Biafran government responded to Nigeria's actions by establishing the Bank of Biafra, which created the currency reproduced by Dike in her artworks. Crucially, artists played a central role in the development of Biafran legal tender, and Achebe recalls that the notes printed in January 1968 were "designed by Simon Okeke and other talented local artists" (*There Was a Country* 150). By repurposing images of surviving Biafran currency, which failed to counter the economic devastation wrought by Nigeria's trade blockade, Dike not only represents material memories of that history. She also registers the important role played by artists in sustaining the secessionist state and prolonging the conflict it catalysed.

The photocopied currency only represents one aspect of these artworks, however. In addition to those residues, Dike creates a striking visual effect by gluing pieces of shredded paper, laid out in vertical and horizontal strips and daubed with light brown and blue-green acrylic paint, onto the canvas. The aesthetic strangeness of this compositional choice recalls Rancière's definition of another type of installation art, which he calls the mystery:

[M]ystery emphasises the kinship of the heterogeneous [...]. I'm thinking of the more modest, sometimes imperceptible way in which assemblages of objects, images and signs presented by contemporary installations have [...] slid the logic of provocative dissensus into that of a mystery that bears witness to a co-presence. (Rancière 91)

Rancière argues that some contemporary installation art has moved beyond the kind of shocking difference usually expressed in collage to bear witness to co-presence and connectivity, even though those linkages may be imperceptible or unreadable. As such, Dike's works could be seen as representing the memory of Biafra as an idea imbued with a sense of creative mystery: as an always partially unreadable aesthetic articulation which gestures to a diverse assortment of significations. This analysis tallies with Antawan Byrd's

response to another of Dike's installations, which he describes as "an exhibition that sidesteps the quick impulse to *be about something* [and] desire[s] to unclutter the theoretical space of the exhibition in an attempt to enable an unfiltered engagement with the work" (Byrd 6, italics in original). Although Biafra is clearly invoked in the two untitled artworks, the strange assemblage of materials portrayed within them similarly resist clear interpretation. Indeed, I would argue that they foreground both the imaginative dynamism and unstable political significance of the war as an historical and creative wellspring for Nigerian artists. The vital but precarious impact of the Biafran conflict that Dike's works express is also powerfully evidenced by the creative career of Oguibe.

### 3.7 Olu Oguibe's exilic installations

While Oguibe was, like Dike, only a young child when the Biafran war raged, he was more directly affected by its ravages. In April 2018, Oguibe offered an emotional account of his experiences as a refugee during the war and of his subsequent engagements with it in his art in a presentation at the Annual International Igbo Conference at SOAS, an event convened to commemorate and explore the many legacies of Biafra. Dike's and Oguibe's contrasting encounters with Biafra and their divergent transnational trajectories – Dike returned to Nigeria from the UK as a teenager while Oguibe left Nigeria as a young adult and has lived in the global north ever since – provide important contextual background for my analysis of their distinctive creative responses to the conflict. However, there are striking correspondences as well as contrasts between their works, which I intend to draw out through further engagements with Rancière's account of critical art.

In an essay exploring the subject of exile and its relationship with artistic creativity, Oguibe underscores the influence of his estrangement from Nigeria on his career:

For as long as I recall, exile has recurred in my work as an artist and thinker, beginning with the very earliest art that I made as a child, a line drawing of an endless train drawn in the sand on the grounds of my father's parsonage in 1968, at the

height of the Biafran war. My family and I thrice fled from that war as refugees.  
 (“Exile and the Creative Imagination” 4)

In this quotation, Oguibe renders his experiences in Biafra as the seminal impetus for his artistic career. In particular, he reveals that it was after seeing throngs of refugees fleeing the conflict that he produced his first image, a sand drawing of the exile train. The transient form of this linear image materially foreshadows the multiple displacements that Oguibe’s family would endure during the war, and gestures to Biafra’s eventual collapse and cartographic effacement. As such, this anecdote provides the basis for Oguibe’s broader conceptualisation of exile as a condition bound up with loss in the essay. He argues: “exile is not so much about movement, relocation or departure as it is about loss: loss of the freedom to remain or return to things familiar” (2). Oguibe’s later artistic meditations on exile, which have developed out of his original sand drawing in Biafra, could therefore be seen as bearing witness to that paradigmatic estrangement. The diverse and multimodal works produced by Oguibe in response to this theme include his long poems *A Song from Exile* (1990) and *A Gathering Fear* (1992), the mixed media painting titled *Mandela* (1994), and the more recent installation pieces, *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument (Monument for strangers and refugees)* (2017) and *Biafra Time Capsule* (2017) (see Figures 15 and 16).<sup>48</sup> I cannot do justice to the diverse complexity of these works in this chapter, so will instead focus on Oguibe’s installation and mixed media pieces in order to highlight his unique contribution to the corpus of Biafran war arts.

Oguibe created the works *Monument for strangers and refugees* and *Biafra Time Capsule* for Documenta 14. The Documenta quinquennial is a preeminent contemporary art event that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany.

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<sup>48</sup> I henceforth refer to *Das Fremdlinge und Flüchtlinge Monument (Monument for strangers and refugees)* simply as *Monuments for strangers and refugees*.



Fig. 15. Exhibition view of *Monument for strangers and refugees* by Olu Oguibe, Documenta 14, 2017, concrete. 3 x 3 x 16.3 m. Königsplatz, Kassel. © documenta archiv/Photo: Michael Nast. © Olu Oguibe.

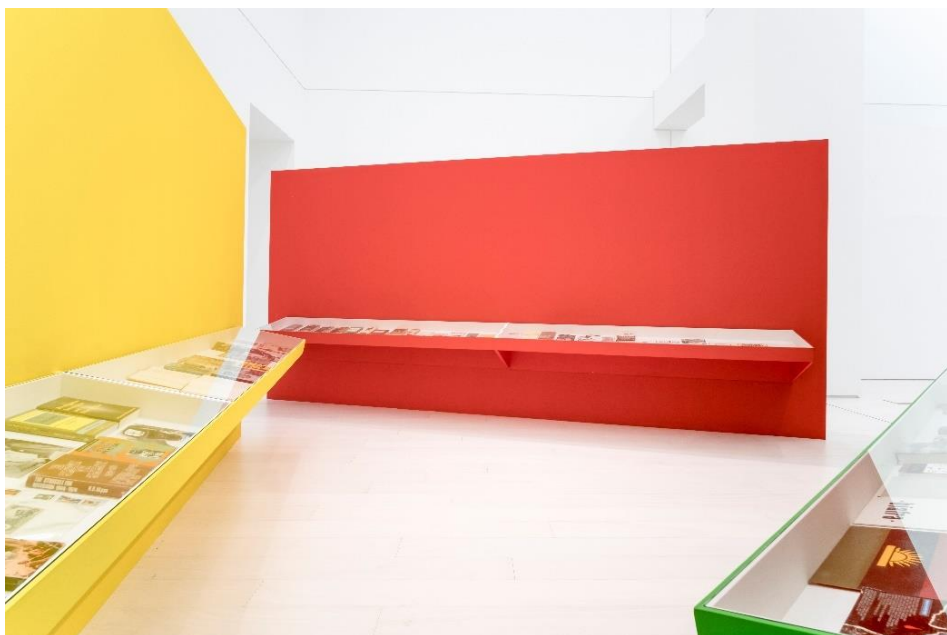


Fig. 16. Exhibition view of *Biafra Time Capsule* by Olu Oguibe, Documenta 14, 2017, documents, archival objects, and mixed media. National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens. © documenta archiv/Photo: Mathias Völzke. © Olu Oguibe.

These works, for which Oguibe was awarded the prestigious Arnold Bode prize for contemporary art (“Olu Oguibe wins” para. 1), act as monuments to the Biafran war. Moreover, they demonstrate the evolution of Oguibe’s practice from the early sand drawings he produced as a child in Biafra. *Monument for strangers and refugees* (see Figure 15) is a sixteen-metre high obelisk set in the heart of Kassel. Inscribed upon the four sides of the monument is the Biblical phrase “I was a stranger and you took me in”, written in English, German, Arabic and Turkish scripts respectively.<sup>49</sup> On one level, this axiom refers to Oguibe’s personal experiences as an exile in Biafra and later from Nigeria. On another, the obelisk’s location and the different languages emblazoned upon it suggest that these biographical resonances form only a small part of a larger constellation of meanings. Indeed, the work references the period in 2015 when Germany opened its borders to people fleeing from conflicts in Syria (Hall and Litchfield paras. 1–2). In that year, the Königsplatz in Kassel became the site of a major demonstration against the poor living conditions of refugees in the country (“Königsplatz” para. 2).

The Nsukka-trained artist Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi underscores the multidirectional meanings enshrined in Oguibe’s Biafran memorial object in his response to the piece. Nzewi reflects: “We see Biafra today as refugees cross into Europe from the many trouble spots in the Middle East and Africa. We see the pains of Biafra as humanity drowns in huge numbers in the high seas approaching the Strait of Gibraltar” (Nzewi para. 3). For Nzewi, Oguibe’s monument to Biafra functions as a metaphor for the experiences of all those forced into exile. The war’s rendering in monumental and static stone thus has the converse effect of imbuing it with unstable and formfooling signifying potential. As Nzewi figures it, the Biafra-inflected meanings at play in this art object both stand in for and are

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<sup>49</sup> The phrase is taken from a passage in the Bible titled “The Sheep and Goats Judgement”, which is located in the book of Matthew, chapter 25, line 35 (King James 2000).

displaced by the exilic trajectories of other human struggles. In Rancière's estimation, such an installation produces a form of encounter or invitation, where "[t]he artist-collector institutes a space of reception to engage the passer by in an unexpected relationship" (89). During such a moment of encounter, "[a]rt no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections. [...] The loss of the 'social bond', and the duty incumbent on artists to work to repair it, are the words on the agenda" (Rancière 90). Relating this to Oguibe's *Monument to strangers and refugees*, Rancière's analysis suggests that while Biafra was and remains a highly divisive event – and despite its affective significance being superseded by subsequent crises – Oguibe re-signifies it in his work with the aim of producing generative social and transnational connections.

A related but also distinctive effect is produced by Oguibe's other installation for Documenta 14, *Biafra Time Capsule*, which was exhibited in the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (see Figure 16). The piece is an archive of novels, poetry collections, history books, photographs, flags and other ephemera, which are displayed in long vitrines mounted on three walls. These structures are painted red, green and yellow (three colours of the Biafran flag), and are positioned in a triangular formation. While the artwork produces a form of encounter that links it to the monument in Kassel, *Biafra Time Capsule* is arguably more reflective of Rancière's definition of the inventory form in installation art. In this mode, as noted in the previous section, "[a]ssembling heterogeneous materials becomes a positive memory [...] that witness[es] a shared history or a shared world" (Rancière 89). The idea of bearing witness to memories is crucial to both of Oguibe's Documenta 14 installations. They are designed to be perceived and interpreted in situ; to be encountered in the public exhibition spaces where they are constructed. Yet while it is possible to physically interact with the granite obelisk in the Kassel town square, the archive of texts and objects that make up *Biafra Time Capsule* texts cannot be touched or opened to read. A transparent but refracting barrier separates the viewer from the archive objects

displayed, suggesting that Oguibe's major interest in the war is as a collector and preserver of memorial remnants, which contrasts with the more provocative and polemical work that came to define the early part of his career.

As a student at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Oguibe gained a reputation for his passionate politics. In a prefatory note written to accompany one of Oguibe's exhibitions, Achebe recalls the notorious valedictory speech given by the young artist when he graduated from the university in the mid-1980s. Achebe was professor of literature at the university at that time (Innes para. 22), and notes that Oguibe gave a "singularly ungracious speech which left everyone in authority from Lagos to Nsukka somewhat muddled and bruised" (Achebe, "Olu Oguibe Exhibition" 1). Achebe goes on to sum up his first impression of Oguibe, calling him "a brilliant but unpredictable, angry young man" ("Olu Oguibe Exhibition" 1). This characterisation of Oguibe as an angry young man gained new significance when, during a study trip to London, he learnt that a warrant had been issued for his arrest back in Nigeria, and he decided to go into exile (Ottenberg 226). In an interview with Kunle Ajibade in 1993, which took place several years after Oguibe left Nigeria, the artist responded to a question about his angry reputation: "The anger is not just because I was forced to leave Nigeria. I'm angry because of the total context of agony in the land. [...] That's where the anger comes from" ("The Artist As An Angry Man" 46). Such emotional and affective intensity is arguably inscribed in Oguibe's poetry collection *A Gathering Fear*, which was published in 1992 in the early years of his exile.

The final poem of the collection, titled "Song for Nigeria", addresses the state of the nation and the legacies of the Biafran war in emotive terms. Throughout the first movement, the poem's persona anaphorically proclaims to the country: "I sing of you" (Oguibe, *Collected Poem* 121–6). At the beginning of the second movement, however, the persona shifts gear: "Do not drive me mad, Nigeria / Don't twist me, bend me, break me" (Oguibe, *Collected*



*Poem 127*). Gesturing to the torturous effects of the Nigerian state's actions on Oguibe's life, this warning transforms into a threat in the subsequent stanza:

[...]  
 Your governors, generals, gunslingers, thieves,  
 Those murderers and pimps who run your affairs  
 Keep their hands off me  
 I am a child of war  
 I have bitterness in my blood  
 [...] (*Collected Poems* 127–8).

In the face of a proliferating list of powerful people bent on exploitation and oppression in Nigeria, the persona – overtly focalising Oguibe's lived experience – confronts these dangerous figures by proclaiming: "I am a child of war" (Oguibe, *Collected Poem* 127). Although this combative verse is primarily concerned with drawing attention to the iniquities of the Nigerian state in the 1990s, the reference to Oguibe's personal experiences of the Biafran war – and the deep bitterness it harvested – amplifies its polemical intensity by suggesting that those affected by the conflict pose a dangerous threat to the corrupt Nigerian authorities.

The rebarbative tone of "Song for Nigeria" is indicative of a broader trend in Nigerian poetics during this period. The author and critic Sule E. Egaya argues that Oguibe and others of his generation should be seen as "conscious activists, radical poets who, in textualising the event of the repressive rule of the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria, have raised, through poems, a hegemonic discourse that installs itself as a political struggle" (2). Such a poetics of political struggle is arguably instantiated in "Song for Nigeria", which casts the poet as a formidable opponent to the nation's elites. However, I would nuance Egaya's further claim that "the poetic category of the military era is a reaction, [...] a certain form of violence by the poets to counter the violence of the military" (8). While the anger woven into Oguibe's verse does evoke a sense of violent reaction in the face of state oppression, this charged affective force does not simply respond to the artist's experiences in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, in choosing to refer to himself as "a child of war" (Oguibe,

*Collected Poems* 127) and therefore to invoke the spectre of Biafra, Oguibe demonstrates that his poetics of struggle is multidimensional. Its affective powers are underpinned by a dynamic mediation of different influences and temporalities.

By contrast, the use of inorganic materials and archival objects in Oguibe's Documenta 14 installations could be interpreted as indexing a dilution of the affective force inscribed in his earlier poetry. The fact that Oguibe chose to exhibit the pieces in European cities and not in Nigeria also suggests that his critical commitment to, and consecration within, the contemporary art world has affected his perspective on the Biafran conflict and its legacies. In an essay exploring the historical position of Nigerian artists in the global field, Oguibe argues that a new generation of Nigerian creative figures – including himself – began to gain visibility in the art world in the late 1980s and 1990s ("Finding a Place" 267):

Highly eclectic, yet solidly rooted in deep knowledge of [...] the cultures and traditions of their background and heritage; increasingly versatile in the requisite art and politics of the international mainstream [...], this new generation is a generation of players who envision themselves and their practice alongside their contemporaries from around the world. (268)

Oguibe highlights the transnational dynamism of this cohort of Nigerian artists, which includes figures with no direct connection to Nsukka, such as Sokari Douglas Camp, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Yinka Shonibare ("Finding a Place" 267). He distinguishes this group from an older generation of artists – populated by figures such as U. Okeke and Aniakor – who were more invested in the Nigerian art scene than the international market (Oguibe, "Finding a Place" 266). That said, he also underscores the younger artists' enduring investment, as with those older figures, in indigenous forms and inherited practices. In this way, Oguibe draws attention to the both positive and negative influences of the contemporary art world on Nigerian artists, which is still dominated by major cultural centres in places such as London and New York ("Finding a Place" 258). Indeed, the title of the essay – "Finding a Place" – casts contemporary Nigerian artists as itinerant figures trying to "navigate" (Oguibe, "Finding a Place" 275) a range of cultural and political forces, and thus shows Oguibe

repurposing the vocabulary of exile to both situate himself within and distance himself from the global art market. As he puts it, these artists are “determined to ensure that they are at home in the world” (275), a formulation that recalls Timothy Brennan’s work *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997).

Diverging from Oguibe’s broadly positive view of the cosmopolitan condition, Brennan contends that “[t]he new cosmopolitanism drifts into view as an act of avoidance if not hostility and disarticulation towards states in formation” (2). This response is redolent of critiques levelled against another related concept, namely ‘Afropolitanism’, which is particularly salient given the focus of this thesis. As Chielozona Eze puts it, one of the “damning weakness[es] of the term [Afropolitanism] is [...] its exclusivity and elitism” (240); its tendency to privilege the experiences of a small group of wealthy and mobile ‘cosmopolitan Africans’ over the majority of people living on the continent. As with Brennan’s assessment of cosmopolitanism’s negative reflexes, such an account of Afropolitanism arguably supports my prior argument that Oguibe’s recent responses to Biafra exhibit a somewhat indirect engagement with the war’s impact in comparison to his earlier poetry. Indeed, Oguibe’s Biafra-inflected installations for Documenta 14 are affected by his self-conscious positioning within the contemporary art world, while their European locations and monumental functions reflect his estrangement from his ancestral homeland. Yet the pieces also show Oguibe’s commitment – as with Dike’s untitled artworks – to cataloguing and interrogating the varied exilic effects and resonances articulated by the Biafran crisis.

In Oguibe’s essay on exile, the artist eloquently describes the reflexive process through which he has survived his existential banishment from Nigeria. Oguibe notes that “exile may only be lived down fruitfully in that embattled yet mobile and secure territory called the Republic of the Imagination. In exile every act is an act of faith” (“Exile and the Creative Imagination” 16). For Oguibe, then, the creative work of an artist in exile represents

an act of spiritual commitment and transition: a leap of imaginative faith into the aesthetic and ethical unknown that, as I argue in the next section, affirms his as well as Dike's commitment to the idea that 'no condition is permanent'. Drawing further from Rancière's work and also from studies of popular cultural forms and Igbo *mbari* aesthetics, I trace obscurer nuances in the Biafra-inflected and exilic arts of the Nsukka group.

### **3.8 No condition is permanent: Biafra and the aesthetics of unknowability**

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the phrase 'no condition is permanent' was employed by the ailing Biafran government in the 1969 *Abiara Declaration*: a manifesto which sought to shore up support for Biafra's independence even as defeat became all but inevitable. Oguibe portrays this axiom in an earlier mixed media work titled *Mandela* (1994) (see Figure 17), which responds explicitly to the end of apartheid in South Africa and to the time he spent in Germany in the 1990s. While I have not been able to find any evidence to suggest that this work self-consciously invokes *The Abiara Declaration*, it is striking that Oguibe transposes the phrase onto a seemingly distinct context through the linear form of graffiti. Indeed, the mutating colours of the 'no condition is permanent' text, which gradually changes from black to white to sanguine red, reinforces my reading of the formfooling aesthetics and affects at play in select Biafran war arts in the previous chapter.



Fig. 17. Olu Oguibe, *Mandela*, 1994, acrylic and paper on canvas. H x W: 190 x 250 cm. Photo: Norbert Aas. © Olu Oguibe.

Oguibe produced *Mandela* while conducting an artist's residency in Germany, under the behest of the historian and curator Norbert Aas.<sup>50</sup> Oguibe produced several works in the studio set up for him in the town hall of Gersthofen, and in an essay responding to this period, Aas notes that “[i]n these works Oguibe had reacted strongly to impressions he received in his transient environment” (305). In *Mandela*, this transience is reflected in the bold, graffiti-like images which index the situation in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The muddy-orange colour that forms the background of the painting reflects this context, functioning as a chromatic representation of the Berlin Wall's structure. Furthermore, the deployment of German words and phrases in the work, and the inclusion of a crossed out swastika and the image of a soldier, all invoke this post-Cold War context.<sup>51</sup> Yet the titular reference to the iconic anti-apartheid activist and politician Nelson Mandela, whose photograph appears in the piece,

<sup>50</sup> Aas also founded the Boomerang Press, which published poetry collections by Oguibe, O. Udechukwu and A. Udechukwu.

<sup>51</sup> Aas details several important contextual points about the painting: “[A]t that time, the German chancellor Helmut Kohl was being challenged by Rudolf Scharping, while the ‘Amigo’ scandal, which eventually forced the prime minister of the state of Bavaria to step down from office, was being hotly debated. After a wave of violent attacks on foreigners by right-wing extremists, anti-Nazi slogans and graffiti appeared everywhere (*gegen nazis*). ‘Sprechen Sie Deutsch?’ is a question Oguibe must have been asked numerous times during his stay” (305).

shows it gesturing beyond Oguibe's immediate situation to engage with other international developments. The oblong shape in which the photograph and word 'MANDELA' are located in the artwork appear to represent a window, potentially reflecting the leader's celebrated release from prison and subsequent campaign for the South African presidency, which took place the year the painting was produced. Despite these overt transnational references, I contend that the *Mandela* artwork is also profoundly affected by Oguibe's experiences in Nigeria and Biafra.

A number of elements in *Mandela* tie it to Nigeria. On the one hand, the orange colour used to signify the wall-like background is also suggestive of the intense, reddish colour of the clay soil that dominates the landscape of eastern Nigeria where Nsukka is situated. This colour choice provides evidence that Oguibe's memories of his ancestral homeland are at play in the work despite its distinctive subject matter and place of production. On the other hand, the graffiti-text that adorns the piece gestures to some of the artworks Oguibe produced in Nigeria before going into exile. Oguibe made his first major artistic statement in 1988, in a joint exhibition with the artist Greg Odo called *Art on the Street* (Ottenberg 227). The exhibition, comprising large pieces of coloured matting emblazoned with graffiti writing attacking the Nigerian military government, was held on the main university thoroughfare in Nsukka. In taking his art to the streets, Oguibe not only wanted to provoke a reaction from the public. He also intended to send a combative message to the artistic and cultural elites at Nsukka and beyond. Oguibe asserts in an interview with Ottenberg that the exhibition rebelled against the idea that creative works should be placed in "inaccessible halls [...] that keep away the people for whom art should be meant" (Oguibe qtd. in Ottenberg 227). This sentiment is reflected and developed in Okeke-Agulu's (writing as C. Okeke) analysis of the social significance of graffiti, which he offers in response to Oguibe's work: "Graffiti gives the artist an opportunity to give vent to his gut feelings about his society. It is also the *vox populi* from which one can read the times" (qtd. in Ottenberg 230, italics in original). This

analysis of graffiti's significance is supported by Alex Alonso, who contends that the typically public form of graffiti is made without the social constraints that might otherwise limit free expression of dissident ideas (2). Taken together, Okeke-Agulu's and Alonso's interpretations of graffiti highlight its function as a highly political and popular creative medium. It can thus be appraised using a popular cultural framework.

In their study of African popular culture, Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome sum up its dynamic potential:

[T]he contents and genres of popular art forms demonstrate a level of experimentation, playfulness, and generic freedom unconstrained by the power relations put in place by 'official' sites and bodies such as editorial teams at publishing houses, curriculum-setting educational committees, [...] and museums. (6)

This reading of the experimental and subversive facets of popular forms suggests that Oguibe's employment of the graffiti-form in *Mandela* is not simply a political statement about the state of present-day Germany and South Africa, nor a mere commentary on Nigeria in the aftermath of Biafra. Rather, Newell and Okome's work invites a reading of Oguibe's graffiti-practice as a form of experimental play: as a practice that involves an exploration of different facets of his expressive powers. These skills, which Oguibe developed as a student at Nsukka, enables him to challenge audiences to interrogate their preconceptions about different subjects through the use of popular techniques.

While it is crucial to remember that Oguibe's *Mandela* work was not produced in Nigeria and does not engage explicitly with this context, I nevertheless contend that the piece – and the arts of the Nsukka group more broadly – are profoundly concerned with navigating the complex socio-cultural aftermath of Biafra both within and without post-war Nigeria through a range of creative means. By utilising the public and dissident faculties of graffiti in *Mandela*, the artist expresses – in line with Rancière's definition of the term – a critical artistic mediation of exile and Biafra. Indeed, the ephemeral but also resistant qualities of graffiti are enshrined in the phrase 'no condition is permanent', which captures the precarious potency

of Biafra's historical significance.

It is important to note, however, that the 'no condition is permanent' axiom is not only associated with the Biafran government. According to Achebe in his war memoir *There Was a Country*, the saying was employed by Igbo people long before Biafra's secession: "The Igbo culture says no condition is permanent. There is constant change in the world" (56). The phrase also crops up in works of literature that engage with Nigerian history. For example, the axiom is given titular prominence in Eliyi Ekinch's work *No Condition is permanent: a historical novel on Nigeria* (1989), which places the war in a longer narrative of the country's colonial and postcolonial development. In the prologue to the novel, Ekinch proclaims: "When in trouble Nigerians often remind their adversaries that No Condition Is Permanent" (para. 6).

This artistic concern for the adaptive and transitive nature of forms bound up with the legacies of the war is reflected in the way Oguibe engages with Igbo *mbari* aesthetics. In an essay exploring several of his paintings, Oguibe introduces the *mbari* form and its cultural significance:

Before the ascendancy of Christianity among the Igbo, the Mbaise and Owerre Igbo worshipped a pantheon of deities principal among which was Ala, goddess of the earth. Every so often, [...] a community would decide on a grand gesture of propitiation and obeisance to the goddess Ala, and would hire a master artist who, together with an army of assistants [...], erected a giant gallery of images comprising statues of the gods, depictions of scenes from mythology as well as everyday life, and an elaborate mural of abstract shapes and signs[.] ("Notes on three paintings" 44)

*Mbari* houses represent highly codified aesthetic structures which enable Igbo communities to honour and interact with the realm of ancestors and deities. Moreover, the *uli* artistic tradition is implicated in the mythical-spiritual philosophy that informs these creations. As Okeke-Agulu notes, "[w]hereas Ala is depicted as the central figure in Mbari structures [...] she appears in Uli in the form of *eke* [the royal python], her messenger" (*Obiora Udechukwu* 21). Earlier in this chapter I demonstrated the significance of the *uli* python symbol for O.



Udechukwu's artistic engagement with the Biafran war, so Okeke-Agulu's analysis serves to further articulate the deep connections between not only *uli* and *mbari*, but between the arts of different members of the Nsukka group.

The physicality of *mbari* houses and their positioning within the topographical and cultural landscape of Igbo communities expresses other important valences for my reading of Nigeria's post-war arts. As noted previously, the idea and name of *mbari* was adapted in the early 1960s to frame new interactive spaces where creative practitioners could exhibit and perform their work and debate contemporary issues. Indeed, it was while attending the Mbari club in Enugu that O. Udechukwu first heard Okigbo read his poetry in the mid-1960s (O. Udechukwu, "An Interview with Obiora Udechukwu" 65). The *mbari* shrines are also noted for the linear designs that adorn the walls of the structures, which include *uli* motifs and decorations specific to the *mbari* tradition. Oguibe explicitly draws from this stylistic dimension of *mbari* in a watercolour painting titled *Exiles* (1990). *Mbari* symbols are used to decorate the cloaks of two abstract exiled figures depicted in this work. These details, along with the collection of bold but translucent linear designs that compose it, resonate with the graphic qualities of O. Udechukwu's earlier woodcut *The Exiles* (see Figure 8).

While Oguibe and O. Udechukwu draw from different Igbo aesthetic lexicons in their art, the thematic as well as stylistic correspondences between their creations index the interconnectedness of Nsukka group members across different generations. Returning to Oguibe's description of the *mbari* house, he adds that "[u]pon completion the gallery, usually constructed in secrecy, was publicly inaugurated and dedicated to the deity [...]. It was then left at the mercy of the elements to unravel and disintegrate and reunite with the earth" (Oguibe, "Notes on three paintings" 44). Transience and transformation are thus at the core of the *mbari* shrine, which is a point reinforced in *Mandela* by the graffiti text proclaiming 'no condition is permanent'. Gradually changing from black to red, it becomes almost indistinguishable with the orange-brown background of the painting.

The influence of *mbari* aesthetics is not only perceivable in Oguibe's artistic engagement with Biafra's legacies, however. In an essay from 1976 exploring possible theoretical foundations for contemporary Nigerian art, U. Okeke – one of the founding members of the Nsukka group – contends: “Mbari is the one word that sums up the creative concept of Biafra – the facts of continuity of creative process and the acceptance of synthesis” (“Search for the theoretical basis” 23). This quotation suggests that U. Okeke views the ritual process and mythical-poetical concept of *mbari* as enshrining the artistic idea of Biafra as opposed to Nigeria. However, he goes on to make a more inclusive claim, asserting that “[t]he Nigerian Civil War was [...] a turning point in Nigerian art” (U. Okeke, “Search for the theoretical basis” 23), enabling a “wider appreciation of what is truly Nigerian in Nigeria's new art culture” (23). U. Okeke does reaffirm his belief that artists should study local art forms and cultural traditions in the essay (“Search for the theoretical basis” 24), but his assertion that the synthetic and adaptive forms of *mbari* express the imaginative spirit of Biafra also clearly influences, and discursively bleeds into, his analysis of Nigerian arts after the war. Indeed, the processes of conceptual, socio-political and stylistic intermingling which U. Okeke articulates in his account help to clarify this chapter's broader concern with the way members of the Nsukka group have responded to the war in their work. That said, I want to complicate the idea that the creative force of Biafra can be reduced to a single form or method. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the historical touchstone of the Biafran war has been channelled through a variety of stylistic, political and experiential lenses by these artists.

Another example of an artwork that obliquely references Biafra's legacies is a piece by Dike – introduced at the beginning of this chapter – called *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown* (see Figure 18). This mixed media piece makes a tangential gesture to Biafra by foregrounding ideas of artistic transitivity and interpretive unknowability.



Fig. 18. Ndidi Dike, *Entropy of State... Journey Into the Unknown*, 2010, acrylic, fishnet, nails, wooden rings on wood. H x W: 243.84 x 121.92 cm. © Ndidi Dike.

In this artwork, Dike creates a dynamic collage of found materials and contrasting colours that is comparable to the composition of her later, untitled works. Reflecting on this period of her career, the artist notes: “the materials in my new work are the result of many excursions, since 2004, to Owode-Oniri (metal-market) in Lagos” (Dike 8), which “gradually enabled me to develop a new way of gauging the possibilities of unknown materials” (8). The artist’s revelation that she deliberately searches for ‘unknown’ materials to use in her practice supports my contention that her later Biafra works, which are also comprised of recycled objects, are intended to explore and express notions of unreadability. As with Oguibe’s adaptation of the popular and dissident form of graffiti in *Mandela*, Dike utilises the poetics and politics of recycling in her arts to explore the possibility of creating, as the anthropologist Karin Barber puts it in a study of African popular culture, “sites of emergent consciousness” (6). Yet this artistic approach also points to other interpretive possibilities. On the one hand, Dike’s use of found and discarded materials shows her responding to the difficult economic situation in Nigeria brought about by widescale corruption in the political and business spheres. These dire straits are reflected in the first part of the piece’s title – *Entropy of State* – which gestures to Nigeria’s economic and political decline in the decades following the war.

On the other hand, Dike's exploration of the potentialities and limitations of different kinds of materials, as well as her investment in the *uli* aesthetic tradition, embodies an exilic practice comparable to that of the Udechukwus and Oguike. Indeed, the cluster of acrylic coils positioned on the righthand side of the work could be seen to represent *agwolagwo* spirals, the *uli* motif which populates the artworks of many Nsukka artists.

Responding specifically to *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown*, Dike contends that it

depicts the compelling intermixture of colours and sculptural components which have lives of their own. The process is captured by the way in which the materials transition from liquid to solid states. Allowing the material, as I compose the work, to reveal itself despite my attempts at constraining it yields an element of surprise. This renders an interesting composition into what seems to be opposite forces agreeing to come together. The squeezing and manipulation of the material reveals its versatility while at the same time exposing tensions that give way to forms of harmony. (8)

Although this description focuses on the physical properties and processes that constitute Dike's art practice, her detailed observations imbue these material mediations with transformative, affective and even ethical possibilities. Dike portrays the materials as attaining a degree of reflexivity and self-consciousness when they undergo processes of physical alteration. These unpredictable transitioning states, which recall the theorisations of exile quoted earlier in my analysis and the account of formfooling propounded in the previous chapter, are produced through the manipulation and intermeshing of oppositional forces. In turn, these processes work to express "forms of harmony" (Dike 8). The fluid layering and intermixing of different colours and surfaces perceivable in *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown* certainly produces a dynamic and transitional stylistic effect. And yet, other significances – the "forms of harmony" (Dike 8) to which the artist refers – can only be partially decoded and read in the pieces.

Rancière notes in his account of critical art that it is the "negotiation between the forms of art and those of non-art that permits the formation of combinations of elements

capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability” (Rancière 84). While Nigerian history and politics clearly inform Dike’s artworks, any hermeneutic appraisal of the meanings expressed by *Entropy of State...Journey Into the Unknown* and her later untitled pieces must be held in tension with this substrate of unknowability, which casts her practice as an always partially unreadable form of representation. Due to this complex and unknowable dynamic, the artistic legacies of Biafra – which, as I have argued, cannot be contained within a single symbolic economy – are necessarily implicated in, and crucial to, its formal negotiations. Indeed, the second part of the work’s title – *Journey Into the Unknown* – directly references the piece by O. Udechukwu already explored in this chapter. This suggests that Dike’s creative exploration of transition and unknowability resonates with the older artist’s interpretations of Biafra. This connection has the effect of aligning their outputs despite the generational and gender politics that could be seen to divide them. More importantly, both these and other Nsukka artists reveal the complex and transitional significances of Biafra for the creative imaginations of post-war Nigerian artists.

### **3.9 Coda: The Nsukka group’s ethical mediations**

The unknowable condition of the Nsukka group’s artistic engagements with Biafra articulate direct as well as oblique connections between a range of signifying terrains, which include gender identity, national politics, aesthetics, geography and emotion. This suggests that the Biafra-related works of Dike, the Udechukwus, Oguibe and others are also engaging in an ethical process of artistic mediation. Returning once more to Butler’s work, the theorist asserts that “ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 136). In Butler’s view, every ethical act is grounded in the kinds of experiences of unknowingness and divergence that the Nsukka artists’ works encompass. With this in mind,

it becomes possible to assert that the transformative political-aesthetic impulse perceivable in so many of the Nsukka artists' creative mediations of Biafra also drives them to articulate and navigate deeper, but necessarily undecidable, ethical questions. Igbo cosmology offers one explanation for this evolution in the Biafran war arts. Okeke-Agulu notes that an ethical imperative is inscribed within all Igbo artistic traditions: "in the Igbo worldview[,] the beautiful *and* the good [are] one and the same thing" (Okeke-Agulu, *Obiora Udechukwu* 19, italics in original). However, as suggested earlier in this chapter, the Igbo cultural framework – and particularly the artistic models of *uli* and *mbari* that spring from it – is deeply inflected with an array of different ethnic, political and imaginative influences. As such, these traditions should not be viewed as clearly circumscribed entities, nor as the only ways of conceptualising the aesthetic-ethics of the Nsukka group's works.

Exploring what he calls a "fundamental undecidability about the politics of art" (Rancière 92), Rancière suggests that such undecidability represents an "aesthetic suspension" (92) wrought through "the identification of [art's] autonomous forms with the forms of life and with possible politics. These possible politics are only ever realized in full at the price of abolishing the singularity of art, the singularity of politics, or the two together" (92). As every act of identification or definition results in the destabilisation of related conceptual and formal frameworks, a more inclusive reading of the selected Nsukka artists' works as both transitional and partly unknowable opens them up to new kinds of interpretation. Indeed, the continually shifting ground of these artists' multimedia enunciations of Biafra attests to the need for multiple models to be applied and tested in order to produce a richer sense of the tangle of navigations, articulations and mediations at play in their exilic and ethical outputs.

Circling back to the question of gender politics in the artworks of the Nsukka group, I finally assert that the unknowable and transitional aesthetic-ethics expressed in their arts show their responses to Biafra creatively navigating categories such as gender identity.

Granted, the marginalisation of female practitioners continues to be a major issue in the Nigerian arts and society more broadly, and I am not suggesting that the possible politics inscribed within the Nsukka artists' compositions are always radically transformative. However, I do contend that the Biafran war was a significant catalyst for the gender boundary crossings and processes of creative queering that appropriations of the 'feminine' *uli* form by male-identifying artists – and the appropriations of 'masculine' sculptural practices by female-identifying creators – have instigated in the Nigerian arts.

This final analysis dovetails with the broader argument of the chapter: that the many forms of political and aesthetic dislocation instituted by the Biafran conflict have driven artists to open up pathways of reading, listening and feeling between people and media that defy clear definition or discernibility. As such, these artistic mediations – which instantiate formfooling processes akin to those explored in the previous chapter – provide a dynamic counterweight to the seemingly intractable divisions in Nigeria that the Biafran war laid bare. Building upon this analysis of the subversive gender politics inscribed in the Nsukka groups' practices, the final chapter of this thesis appraises the imaginative queering of Biafra by Nigerian artists. Exploring the way that the Biafran crisis has been used to frame and uncover queer identities and stories in the creative arts, I consider the deeper implications of works that probe the subversive significances of the war in provocative ways.

#### 4) Queering the Biafran war arts

Love was the cruellest war, raging battles  
in torn hearts, love defiant as dawn,

bouncing like a ball in search of players,  
love across the dividing lines. (Akeh, “Biafran Nights” 70)

In the “Author’s Note” that follows the epilogue to *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Chinelo Okparanta notes her primary motivation for writing her first novel:<sup>52</sup>

On January 7, 2014, Nigeria’s President, Goodluck Jonathan, signed into law a bill criminalizing same-sex relationships and the support of such relationships, making these offenses punishable by up to fourteen years in prison. In the northern states, the punishment is death by stoning. This novel attempts to give Nigeria’s marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation’s history. (para. 1)

This manifesto is both an indictment of the failings of the Nigerian state to protect all of its citizenry and a profound statement about the power of art to speak to and express the lives of oppressed persons. It casts *Udala Trees*, which has been described by the *New York Times* as one of the most impactful works of LGBTQ+ literature in the last twenty years (Obi-Young para. 1), as a novel designed not only to empower LGBTQ+ Nigerians in the face of draconian legislation, but also to inscribe those people’s stories within the narrative of Nigeria’s history. Okparanta’s statement features a crucial omission, however. For, as the author portrays her novel as a political statement about the historical oppression of LGBTQ+ people in Nigeria, she neglects to note the particular and provocative context she uses in order to frame this project: the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Given the controversy and opprobrium that have attended the issues of LGBTQ+ rights and the history of the Nigeria-Biafra war in Nigeria, the fact that Okparanta fails to make plain the significance of Biafra as a lens for her self-consciously queer narrative of the nation is striking. While it is feasible that Okparanta or an editor felt that it was unnecessary

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<sup>52</sup> I henceforth refer to the novel as *Udala Trees*.



to reiterate the significance of the war for the novel in the “Author’s Note”, especially as the note falls after the main body of the text, it is one of my central contentions in this chapter that the elision of Biafra in this authorial statement of LGBTQ+ activism in Nigeria should not be read as incidental. Indeed, the tentative and circumlocutory way Okparanta describes the provocative intertwining of the Biafran war narrative with marginalised and subversive sexual identities in *Udala Trees* gestures to a vital but largely overlooked vein of queer mediation that runs through the artistic legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war.

At the close of the previous chapter, I suggested that the emphasis placed on aesthetic and ethical unknowability in the arts of the Nsukka group demonstrates the capacity of the war as a creative touchstone to destabilise and reimagine categorisations of gender. This built on the first chapter, which located and theorised what I defined as a formfooling creative modality – which has radical aesthetic as well as political and identitarian effects – present in a variety of artistic works responding to Biafra. In the third chapter of the thesis, I take these analyses further by probing instances where the Nigeria-Biafra conflict has not only been used to frame queer narratives and imagery, such as in Okparanta’s novel, but where conceptions of the war have themselves been queered through processes of creative transposition and mediation. Yet I use the term ‘queer’ to describe these formations and dynamics in artists’ creative responses to Biafra advisedly. There is a substantial and growing body of scholarship and other non-fictional narratives that explore queer identities, subjectivities and activism in relation to African as well as broader postcolonial contexts.<sup>53</sup> In their introduction to the *Queer African Reader* (2013), for example, the editors Sokari Ekiné and Hakima Abbas explain their use of the word ‘queer’:

We use [...] ‘queer’ [...] to denote a political frame rather than a gender identity or sexual behaviour. We use queer to underscore a perspective that embraces gender

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<sup>53</sup> This corpus of works includes Stephanie Newell’s *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (2006), Evan Mwangi’s *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (2009), Donna McCormack’s *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (2014), Chantal Zabus’s *Out in Africa: Same-sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures & Cultures* (2013), the critical collection *Queer Theory in Film & Literature: African Literature Today* 36 (2018) and the anthology of first-hand testimonies titled *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria’s Queer Women Speak* (2018).

and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order [...]. Queer is our dissident stance, but we use it here knowing the limitations of the terminology to our African neocolonial realities. (3–4)

Important for my purposes is the way Ekine and Abbas conceptualise queerness in Africa as not only an identity position but also as a dissident political approach that can have revolutionary socio-cultural effects. Indeed, by developing my earlier analysis of the fissuring frames and transitional aesthetic articulations in Biafran war arts, this chapter demonstrates that the queer dissidence Ekine and Abbas locate has a particular imaginative significance in such artistic responses.

By building on these theoretical foundations and by drawing on a range of queer, postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories – from Sigmund Freud’s explorations of taboos and dreaming to Nicole Simek’s account of postcolonial psychoanalysis – this chapter suggests that the Biafran war and its aftermath have proven to be fertile ground for such queer negotiations. Indeed, I argue that reading Biafra’s artistic legacies through a queer prism offers a nuanced appraisal of the conflict’s complex and highly diverse cultural afterlives. Representations of Biafra have not only been used to queer political, formal and institutional boundaries, however. This chapter further asserts that it has also served to queerly imagine alternative and (im)material cultural-political visions of the war, although not always in generative or progressive ways.

In this vein, I want to nuance Louisa Uchum Egbunike’s suggestion, made in her introduction to an art exhibition titled *Legacies of Biafra* held at SOAS between January and March 2018, that artists’ engagements with the history and memory of the war work to project new futures for Nigeria: “What underpins this exhibition are depictions of both loss and survival, representations of endurance and the presentation of future possibilities” (Egbunike 7). Complicating this view, I contend that a queer reading of Biafra’s artistic legacies reveals the war to have disrupted the potential for fresh perspectives on Nigerian history as much as it has catalysed alternative visions through the war’s representation. In

doing so, I probe a further facet of the “patchy fabric” (Forsyth 7) of Biafra’s artistic legacies sketched out in the introduction to the thesis.

In order to tease out the possibilities as well as pitfalls of this queer formulation, I have chosen to focus primarily on Okparanta’s *Udala Trees* in the chapter. This is because of its striking employment of both gynocentric and queer narrative frames to explore legacies of the Nigeria-Biafra war, and because it has received scant attention in the scholarship of the conflict’s cultural reception. As I show in later sections, the novel makes a profound but generally overlooked contribution to debates about the relationship between sexuality, gender and war by tracing the dissonances as well as generative potentialities of this difficult terrain. After elaborating on the theoretical framework and approach of the chapter in the following two sections, the first part of my analysis of *Udala Trees* examines the ways that the novel articulates ideas of taboo and allegory in its juxtaposition of the Biafran war and LGBTQ+ narratives. I contend that the form and content of the text work to disrupt this thematic combination even as they are framed and enabled by Okparanta’s engagement with those concerns. I then compare *Udala Trees* with two other works that express queer themes: Ogali A. Ogali’s pamphlet “No Heaven for the Priest” (1971), which, in part, makes an argument for the legalisation of polygamy in Nigeria, and select photographs by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, which creatively portray and subvert iconography of African masculinity, sexuality and victimhood.<sup>54</sup> Drawing again from Judith Butler’s *Frames of War*, particularly her theorisation of the unstable and iterable structures of norms, I assert that these pieces use their subversive politics to authenticate and make marketable their interventions in the conflict’s legacies. In the latter sections of the chapter, I explore the significance of dreaming and intersubjective communication for Okparanta’s narrative. As my analysis of these

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<sup>54</sup> Ogali’s “No Heaven for the Priest” is reproduced in the collection *Veronica My Daughter and other Onitsha market plays and stories* (1980).

moments of oneiric mediation demonstrates, they represent instances when Biafra's socio-cultural shadows are inventively remediated through both their invocation and occlusion.

#### 4.1 Queer futures, contestations and work

Egbunike's assertion about the future possibilities underpinning artistic representations of Biafra is also significant given the context of its publication. The very fact that the *Legacies of Biafra* exhibition was put on in London rather than at a Nigerian university or gallery lays bare the transnational dynamics and political sensitivities that have underlined Biafra's creative legacies. It also raises the question of which persons Egbunike refers to when she asserts that "the collective effort of interrogating our history [...] moves us towards a better understanding of our past, a better understanding of each other and, I hope, a better prospect for our future" (7). Egbunike does not define the group who must probe the legacies of Biafra in order to generate better prospects, and this arguably reflects the multivalent, contested and queer significations that have surrounded the conflict since the late 1960s.

Egbunike's invocation of tropes of futurity to legitimise the exhibition's engagement with painful pasts, which she argues opens up the potential for hopeful but undefined alternative trajectories for Biafra and Nigeria, resonates with the argument of Lee Edelman's monograph *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Through his analysis, L. Edelman contends that queer subjectivities should resist the seemingly ineluctable heteronormative drive towards reproductive futurism (2–4). Egbunike arguably expresses Biafra's futurity in such queer terms: as a vexed cultural cadence that simultaneously projects and obscures new possibilities. However, the scholar does not fully probe the political-aesthetic mechanisms and histories that have undergirded this development. Offering a counterweight to what I perceive to be a lack of critical engagement with this tense dynamic, this chapter reveals that Biafra has not only been used to evoke alternative or ethical futures

by artists. It has also functioned as an irritant, as a febrile and fragile catalyst and queer taboo within Nigeria's post-war cultural imaginary.

Despite there being, I believe, a productive entanglement – to draw once again from Sarah Nuttall's use of the term (20) – of queer dynamics with Biafra's fraught socio-cultural history, there is a pressing danger that such an approach ends up privileging moments of radical emancipation and subversive transformation within queer narratives over instances of ambivalence, conformity or failure. As Donna McCormack remarks in her analysis of queer postcolonial narratives, “[q]ueer postcoloniality does not entail rejecting or proving all norms are bad” (12). Instead, McCormack asserts that it “gives recognition to the ways in which spaces are produced through the disaggregation of the home from the nation and sexuality, race, gender and morphological normalcy from political/state concerns” (12). Such a conceptualisation of queer postcoloniality corresponds closely with Sara Salih's definition of the term, which I quote in the introduction to this thesis, as “short-circuiting any recourse to the clichés of nationalism” (3).

Building on these formulations, I contend that Biafra's queer residues have expressed precisely this kind of disaggregating power, although in different political-aesthetic guises and with both generative and occluding effects. By tracing these sorts of difficult and precarious negotiations, this chapter takes seriously Butler's caution that “if the term queer is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is [...] never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered” (*Bodies That Matter* 228). I aim to operate in the spirit of Butler's clarion call by conveying the complexity of Biafra's queering force. To do so, I engage with works that not only couple the Biafran war with LGBTQ+ identities, politics and desires in explicit ways, but that also do queer work in relation to Biafra through different means.

I take the idea of queer work from Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006). In a section exploring the phenomenological processes and ramifications underpinning women 'becoming lesbians', Ahmed asserts that "it requires a reorientation of one's body such that other objects, those that are not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of straight culture, can be reached" (100). Noting that such queer orientations "involve work" (Ahmed 100), Ahmed ties her reading of the efforts undergirding these mediations to the idea that "being queer matters" (101):

I would say that being orientated in different ways matters precisely insofar as such orientations shape what bodies do: it is not that the 'object' causes desire, but that in desiring certain objects *other things follow*, given how the familial and the social are already arranged. It does 'make a difference' for women to be sexually oriented toward women in a way that is not just about one's relation to an object of desire. (100–1, italics in original)

In relation to my broader study of the Nigeria-Biafra war's artistic legacies, it is precisely those 'other things' instantiated and made possible by queer modes of reorientation that I am interested in pursuing in relation to mediations of Biafra. I am concerned with illuminating the queer dynamics and work that 'make a difference' in creative responses to the conflict in compelling and challenging ways. Put another way, such narrative orientations uncover the "constructive instability" (4) that Salih contends is crucial to the mechanics of queer postcoloniality.

Afam Akeh draws attention to this queer complexity in his war poem "Biafran Nights", which forms the epigraph to this chapter. The verse professes that "Love was the cruellest war, raging battles / in torn hearts, love defiant as dawn, // [...] love across the dividing lines" (70). In these lines, the poet argues that love was the conflict's most bitter battleground, breaking ties of kinship as well as nationhood. Yet he also attests to the audacity of such torn affections to endure and adapt even in the face of devastation, rendering the war as a kind of queer and dissident signifying ground. While this formulation illustrates how boundaries of identity, nation and desire have been creatively queered by

artists in relation to Biafra, it is crucial to underscore that Akeh's verse glosses over the more violent and violating expressions of desire that were enacted during the conflict. As the scholars Axel Harneit-Sievers and Sydney Emezue argue in a social historical study of the Nigeria-Biafra war:

While sexual violence of soldiers against women of a conquered area did not, in Nigeria, amount to a comprehensive attack on the ethnic and cultural identity of the enemy side (as happened in Rwanda or Bosnia), sexual violence against women was a widespread experience there, too. (118)

Akeh's "Biafran Nights" does not engage explicitly with the role of sexual violence during the conflict. However, given the poem's assertion that "Love was the cruellest war" (70), this omission indicates a blind spot in Akeh's creative thinking regarding this urgent and distinctly gendered issue. Indeed, this erasure is reinforced later in the poem when it is averred that for those living with the legacies of the conflict, "Failure is their much-taken whore" (72).

The reductive and potentially denigrative treatment of female experiences portrayed in "Biafran Nights", which problematises the poem's instantiation of more generative queer possibilities, demonstrates the necessity of interrogating the gender-political assumptions and blind spots that influence Biafran narratives. Indeed, such a critical approach requires an awareness that queer readings of narratives of war run the risk of problematically conflating a range of expressions of desire and intimacy, and thus of overlooking the extreme power imbalances and violent abuses that are bound up with the history of Biafra. McCormack demonstrates a related concern in her study of queer postcolonial narratives, noting that intimate and queer modes of touch "can be violent, aggressive, and sexually intimidating" (31). Despite this crucial admission, the critic also underscores the importance of exploring "how our sense of being with others is not always or necessarily about violence [or] domination" (31). While it is vital to keep in mind concerns about the ethical implications of analysing queer modes of intimacy in narratives of war, I nevertheless want to pursue –

following McCormack's lead – the generative possibilities woven into Akeh's articulation of the Biafran war as signifying "love across the dividing lines" (70).

#### 4.2 Queer readings of African literature and psychoanalysis

The simultaneously queer and multimodal analysis that I undertake in this chapter marks a significant departure in the scholarship of the creative heritage of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Although critics such as Brenna Munro have noted the intersection between queer identities and warsapes in a range of writings by Nigerian authors, no work has yet been done to consider how the Biafran war might itself represent a fertile and queer setting for the development of such narrative genealogies. Chantal Zabus engages with some of the limitations involved in applying a queer framework to African realities in *Out in Africa: Same-sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures & Cultures* (2013). Speaking to the risk of promulgating theorisations of queerness that only reflect the experiences of a small group of people in the global north, Zabus warns that "the subject's desire in some African novels is not to be 'queer' in the sense of manifesting multiple identities lying within subjectivity" (12). As such, the scholar chooses to "employ terms such as 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' when the African novelists [...] themselves use them when 'queer' proves to be particularly offensive or inadequately describes a culture-specific sexual practice" (Zabus 13). While I agree with Zabus that the terminology used to describe same-sex desires needs to be chosen with sensitivity, I also think that queerness is a more complex and expressive concept than the critic's subject-oriented usage allows. With this in mind, I support McCormack's more generous conceptualisation of queer postcoloniality as "the desire to open up texts to readings that do not assume a disaggregation of postcolonialism from queer or disabled morphologies, desires and sexualities" (11). Using this definition as a theoretical springboard, I pursue a queer approach to creative works in this chapter that opens up intersections between identities, narratives and forms in representations of the Biafran war.



Despite there being a growing body of criticism that engages with the significance and emergence of queer characters and politics in contemporary Nigerian literature, the nuance of artworks engaged queerly with Biafra tends to be downplayed or overlooked entirely in these scholarly interventions. For instance, while several sections of Zabus's monograph *Out in Africa* are dedicated to tracing queer resonances in texts by Nigerians – particularly those who form part of the country's 'third generation' writers – the tradition of Biafran war writing is barely mentioned in the work. An exception to this critical paucity is Brenna Munro's article "Locating 'Queer' in Contemporary Writing of Love and War in Nigeria" (2016), which explores the connections between ideas of trauma, sexuality and perverse masculinity in a number of child soldier narratives, notably Adichie's *Yellow Sun*, Abani's *Song for Night* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*. Munro argues that in these texts, Nigerian child soldiers emerge as "a stigmatized subject produced through the queer violence of war, and the dilemma of the boy-soldier narrative is (usually) how to absolve, rescue or normalize this figure" (122). Noting the tendency for such works to portray the experiences of child soldiers as vacillating between opposing poles along a perversity/innocence axis (Munro 133), Munro also asserts that this character-type, along with the figure of the gay or lesbian,

may indeed also be a means of working through the global nature of Nigerian life and literature; anxieties about the nation and its integrity, its fragmentation, and its dispersal get mapped onto these figures, who are coded in different ways as transnational, moving across or destroying national borders as well as bodily boundaries. (123)

While this passage offers a rich reading of the broader contextual significances and potentialities of queer bodies in Nigerian war texts, it also appears to reduce these figures to coded allegories of the fragmented and transnational Nigerian body politic. Such a treatment arguably undercuts Munro's tracing of the embodied 'stickiness' – borrowing Ahmed's theorisation of the term (qtd. in Munro 125) – of blood and stigma in representations of Nigerian warsapes. While ideas of allegory are always being engaged with and tested in

artworks that portray the lived experiences of individuals and groups during political crises, Munro's analysis of the child-soldier figure in these narratives tends to read them as mere signifiers of subversion and transformation within Nigerian literature. By so doing, the article excludes the other aspects of war writing from Nigeria that might be doing queer work in different ways.

While this thesis is indebted to queer theory as a way of illuminating the tense Biafran mediations studied in this chapter, another theoretical bedrock for this chapter is provided by Sigmund Freud's seminal theories of human psychology and their subsequent critical reception. Particularly significant is his work on the structures and significance of taboos, sexuality and dreams. Before I introduce Freud's analysis of these concepts, particularly as they are explored in *Totem and Taboo* (first published in German in 1913, and subsequently in English in 1919), it is pertinent to contextualise my redeployment of this facet of Freud's psychoanalytic theory in order to unpack the artistic legacies of Biafra. Crucially, I am not the first to apply Freud's study of the psychological implications of cultural totemism and taboo to the history of the Nigeria-Biafra war. In *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (1997), which I quoted from in the introduction to this thesis, Alex de Waal draws from the Freudian lexicon to make a provocative claim about the impact of Biafra on the development of humanitarianism in the twentieth century: "Biafra is totemic for contemporary relief: it was an unsurpassed effort in terms of logistical achievement and sheer physical courage. But Biafra is also a taboo: the ethical issues that it raises have still to be faced" (73). Despite the clear influence of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* on this passage, de Waal does not engage with the substance of the psychoanalyst's theorisation of those potent terms or consider how Freud's work might be relevant for a study of wider cultural responses to the crisis. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, his conceptualisation of Biafra as both totem and taboo, as both a foundational and occluded historical moment, does lay the groundwork

for a Freud-inflected reappraisal of the socio-cultural discourses that have developed both within and beyond the Nigerian art scene since the late 1960s.

This chapter supplements de Waal's analysis by engaging directly with Freud's theory and the scholarship that has flourished as a result of it. And yet, it is important to acknowledge that Freud's theories – produced as they were during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – have been criticised for reinforcing the overtly colonialist, racist and sexist discourses so prevalent at that time.<sup>55</sup> Such issues are articulated from different theoretical perspectives by Ranjana Khanna and Renée C. Hoogland. Khanna begins her work *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2004) by noting that “Freud infamously referred to women's sexuality as a ‘dark continent’ for psychoanalysis” (ix), an assertion that frames her broader study of “what it means to make colonialism and women the starting point for an investigation of psychoanalysis” (ix). In comparison, Hoogland argues in her article “First Things First: Freud and the question of primacy in gendered sexuality” (1999) that, in Freud's account of “‘normal’ psychosexual development[,] the subject's identification with the parent of one sex normally entails (sexual) desire for the parent of the opposite sex” (45). This psychoanalytic model, Hoogland further contends, provides “a quasi-scientific foundation to a notion of sexual difference cast in the oppositional terms of heterosexual reproduction” (45). In these quotations, Khanna and Hoogland draw attention to the limits of Freudian theory when it is applied to the issues of colonial legacy and non-normative sexuality. However, they ultimately attest to the enduring efficacy of Freud's work by adapting and reframing his arguments rather than by rejecting them.

On the one hand, Khanna states that a reconfigured psychoanalysis – one that reads against the grain of its colonial heritage – “becomes the means through which contingent postcolonial futures can be imagined ethically” (xii). On the other hand, Hoogland notes in

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<sup>55</sup> The subtitle to *Totem and Taboo – Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* – lays bare the serious and problematic implications involved in trying to apply it to recent historical developments in non-European contexts.

her conclusion that “Freud defined theories as ‘passionate fictions’[, a]s visions on the world” (54) rather than definitive or scientific proofs. These critical interpretations of Freud, which re-envision his works as a tool for navigating entangled histories and diffuse subjectivities, tacitly reinforce Michel Foucault’s earlier assertion that figures such as Freud, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche “established the endless possibility of discourse” (Foucault 131). Echoing this view, I contend that there is a richness to Freud’s account that – regardless of its clear limitations – can be used to shed new light on some of the queer dynamics already introduced. In particular, his articulation of the transmissibility, ambivalence and sexual significance of cultural taboos, as well as his study of the erratic and arbitrary structure of dreams, can help to unpick some of the queer concerns expressed by the works under investigation. To clarify, I am not suggesting that Freud’s theories offer the only means of working through these dynamics. Rather, I am interested in exploring the possible applicability of Freud to the distinctive context of Biafra’s creative aftermath. With this in mind, I now commence my reading of Okparanta’s novel *Udala Trees*. As a passionate and complex fictionalisation of the Nigeria-Biafra war, I use Freud and other critical approaches to illustrate the novel’s queer refraction of the conflict through multiple and sometimes discordant frames, which span the theological, the romantic and the speculative.

### **4.3 Messy modalities in *Udala Trees***

*Udala Trees* opens just before the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967. It tells the story of an Igbo family living in Ojoto (a town located within the secessionist territory) who become caught up in the conflict. The novel subsequently follows these characters as they navigate Biafra’s aftermath. Narrated retrospectively by its main protagonist Ijeoma, who is in her early teens when the war commences, the text is split into six parts and an epilogue, with each section depicting a period of her life. The first part relates two seminal events during the war when Ijeoma’s life is irrevocably changed. One of these transformative

moments is the death of her father, Uzo, who is killed during an air raid. Ijeoma's narrative voice reflects that her father "had lost hope" (*Udala Trees* 9) as the conflict proceeded, and subsequently reveals that he chose not to run to the shelter with his wife and daughter when bomber planes tore across the sky (9). The second moment relates to Ijeoma's mother Adaora. Struggling to cope in the aftermath of her husband's death, Adaora decides to send her daughter away to live as a house girl for a grammar school teacher for the remainder of the conflict.

These two choices haunt Ijeoma's narrative, both for good and for bad. As a castaway of war, she discovers queer desires, which are consecrated in the immediate aftermath of the conflict with another teenage girl, Amina. Her same-sex orientation becomes further articulated years later when, living with her mother in the town of Aba, she meets a woman called Ndidi and is introduced to a world of lesbian love and community hidden in plain sight. Despite feeling conflicted about her queer identity because of the dangers and social stigma faced by LGBTQ+ peoples in Nigeria, negative perceptions reinforced by her fundamentalist Christian mother, Ijeoma cannot overcome or repudiate them even when she breaks off her relationship with Ndidi and marries a man, Chibundu. After years of domestic strife and abusive treatment, she eventually leaves her husband with their young daughter, Chidinma, and returns to live with her mother. The novel's epilogue is set decades after this series of events in 2014, which is the same year that The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act became law in Nigeria (Kaleidoscope Trust 1). Ijeoma reveals that despite the enduring dangers and repression facing LGBTQ+ peoples in the country, she and Ndidi have since reconciled (*Udala Trees* 320), and she reveals that she is hopeful that her daughter will lead a new generation of Nigerians who will help change societal attitudes for the better (318). While the narrative of *Udala Trees* is told principally from and through the perspective of Ijeoma, it is also the story of her mother's struggle to deal with the aftermath of her husband's death during the war and her sense of guilt for abandoning Ijeoma. At the novel's close,

however, she tacitly forgives herself and her husband for their actions during the conflict and accepts her daughter's queer identity, enshrining the potential for redemption as well as transformation at the end of the narrative.

While the text is constructed around these developments, this plot outline reveals that Okparanta's creative coupling of the war with LGBTQ+ issues does not offer a clear causative through-line from the former to the latter. Rather, the writer plays with the possibilities as well as the limits of their political and imaginative entwinement throughout the work. As the narrator reflects in the first part of the novel,

[i]t was 1967 when the war barged in and installed itself all over the place. [...] How long into the future would we have to bear the burden of our loss? Would we recover?

All these questions, [...] and everything had already changed.  
But there were to be more changes. (*Udala Trees* 4)

The foregrounding of seminal moments of change at this early point in the narrative is further enforced by the first of several textual digressions that diverge from the central story of Ijeoma and her family. These excursions take various forms throughout the novel, as tales from European as well as indigenous oral traditions, and as dreams and religious allegories. The layering of these different strands of textual reality work to reflexively nuance as well as frustrate the account of Ijeoma's life during and after the war.

The first of these digressions falls in the chapter following the death of Ijeoma's father, Uzo, and after the character's narrative voice recalls her mother proclaiming that she would lose her mind if they stayed in their current home (*Udala Trees* 36). Following this exclamation, the narrative voice deviates from the main storyline: "Once upon a time, there was a girl who had an idea of the way the world should be: castles in the village, a papa and a mama who were alive and happy" (*Udala Trees* 36–7). Framing the meta-textual fragment as a fairy-tale in the European tradition, which points to the deep epistemic impact of British colonialism on the cultural imaginaries of colonised populations, the narrative voice goes on to reflect that as this girl grew older, her certainty about her life began to crumble: "Of late,

it seemed it was always one upheaval after another, one change and then the next” (*Udala Trees* 37). Yet the moral of the girl’s tale is that “not all change was bad” (*Udala Trees* 37), and this more positive interpretation is subsequently imbued with religious significance:

She thought of church, and she thought that change was indeed a thing sanctioned by God, whether good or bad change. Perhaps it was part of His aesthetic, part of His vision for the world. Perhaps everything was a reflection of that vision of change. (37)

The repeated and jarring emphasis placed on the word ‘change’ in this quotation arguably shows the narrative voice, and by extension Okparanta, belabouring the point. Indeed, at the start of the next paragraph, the true subject of this thinly veiled allegory is made bluntly clear when the narrative voice asserts that “I was that girl” (*Udala Trees* 37). This passage’s content and its discordant textual form frame the novel’s broader concern with challenging categorical interpretations of Biblical teaching. It also illustrates the central and multivalent thread of transformation woven through the novel, which functions at various thematic, formal and religious-spiritual levels and has disruptive as well as generative effects.

The protean and unyielding form of *Udala Trees*, which traverses multiple genres and is layered with numerous excursive textual fragments, is perhaps one of the reasons why critics have tended not to engage with it in any detail. Although the novel has been mentioned in analyses of homosexual narratives in Nigerian literature, such as in a footnote to Munro’s article that briefly glosses the novel’s queer form, it has generally been marginalised within the discourse.<sup>56</sup> Such a cursory scholarly treatment of *Udala Trees* is offered by the literary critic John C. Hawley in the article “In transition: self-expression in recent LGBTIQ narratives” (2017). Hawley’s main points in his brief reading of the narrative are that, on the one hand, the novel is “[r]eminiscent of [...] Adichie’s [...] *Yellow Sun*” (122) because it views “the Biafran war only off in the distance, through the lens of personal relationships” (122).

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<sup>56</sup> In the article, Munro notes that *Udala Trees* “combines a noncombatant’s account of the Biafran War with a girl’s coming out story” (135).

On the other hand, he suggests that “[f]or all its anguish, [...] [it] does offer its characters a glimpse of a future where intolerance throughout Nigeria might be replaced by an acceptance of LGBTIQ citizens” (Hawley 123). I return to the question of the Adichie-Okparanta connection later in the chapter, but it is notable that Hawley does not nuance his general comparison between them in the article, suggesting that he assumes such a coupling of *Yellow Sun* and *Udala Trees* is inevitable. Indeed, the lack of detailed analysis of the novel provided in Hawley’s essay tends to render the text as derivative of earlier works rather than as significant or radical in its own regard. This is an attitude that I intend to overturn.

Returning to the ethos of change and didactic revisionism inscribed early on in Okparanta’s text, it is noteworthy that this conviction is reiterated in the epilogue:

[I]f the Old and New Testaments are any indication, then change is in fact a major part of His aesthetic, a major part of His vision for the world. The Bible is itself an endorsement of change. [...]

Many days I reason to myself that change is the point of it all. And that everything we do should be a reflection of that vision of change. (*Udala Trees* 322)

Now speaking in the present rather than the past tense, Ijeoma’s narrative voice confidently proclaims that transformation is “in fact” (*Udala Trees* 322) crucial to God’s aesthetic, rather than tentatively suggesting that it is “[p]erhaps” (37) the case, as she did in the opening section. These shifts arguably reflect the personal journey that Ijeoma has gone on throughout the narrative. Indeed, by the time of the epilogue, she has not only embraced her lesbian identity but has also reconciled her homosexuality with her Christian faith. And yet, even when accounting for these minor shifts in tense and tone, the two passages are strikingly similar despite being located at opposite ends of the text. This raises the question of why it is important that this sentiment is foregrounded and reiterated in the novel in allegorical and then directly political terms. More pressingly, it challenges the reader to consider how this framing relates to its disjointed portrayal of a homosexual woman whose queer identity flowers in the shadow of the Nigeria-Biafra war.



On the one hand, the vision of continual transformation and narrative inconclusivity espoused by the novel resonates with my analysis of the ethics of unknowability and transition in the arts of the Nsukka group in the previous chapter. It raises, once more, the spectre of the phrase ‘no condition is permanent’, which was so ambiguously deployed in *The Abiara Declaration* by the Biafran leadership and, as I argued in the previous two chapters, conveys the destabilising but also generative imperative that has defined Biafra’s artistic afterlives. However, given the somewhat overstated and seemingly disconnected way that this vision of transformation is mooted in *Udala Trees* – a novel that deliberately uses the Biafran crisis as a way of inscribing queer subjectivities into Nigerian history – a more nuanced appraisal of the transitional aesthetic-ethical impulse that has marked the Nigeria-Biafra war’s legacies is required. As such, it is important to illustrate at this stage that it is not only very contemporary creative works such as Okparanta’s novel that have demonstrated a tense and fractured reimagining of the war through engagements with subversive sexual politics. I now introduce two earlier pieces by artists that explore the queer potential of Biafra, which help to sketch out the longer history of politically and sexually subversive works that *Udala Trees* forms a part of.

#### **4.4 Biafra’s queer genealogies**

In 1971, barely a year after the end of the war, the popular Onitsha market pamphleteer Ogali A. Ogali released a hybrid and polemical tract reflecting on the conflict titled “No Heaven for the Priest”. It begins as a critique, written in Ogali’s characteristically bombastic style, of the exploitative actions of religious leaders in Biafra during the crisis: “Any living soul, who can add two and two and get four, will agree with me that those in the Holy Orders, the so-called Christian workers, cheated and deceived God and Man during the last civil war in the country” (350). However, later in the tract, Ogali diverges from this engagement with the conflict and instead launches an excoriating attack on the brand of Christianity being

promulgated in Nigeria. Ogali is particularly critical of the way Christianity has, in his opinion, corrupted indigenous values and condemned traditional practices such as polygamy:

Realising that man is naturally polygamous, and that man is the greatest deceiver of all the created creatures, I begin to wonder whether any man will ever go to the so-called heaven, where it is alleged honesty is the key word.

Some self-appointed saints make the world believe that those who go contrary to the 'one man, one wife' doctrine go to hell. These are the people, the very people, who will be in hell with me. And woe betide them if I dare see them in hell, because as a V.I.P. in hell, I shall treat them like fags. ("No Heaven for the Priest" 350)

As with the passages quoted from *Udala Trees* above, Ogali makes no explicit reference to the Nigeria-Biafra war in this polemical prose. There is therefore a striking symmetry between the two texts insofar as they refuse to forge a clear connection between the conflict's aftermath and their particular sexual politics. More significantly, the fact that a writer such as Ogali should choose to use the Biafran conflict as an imaginative access point and frame for making a distinct political argument in the early 1970s illustrates that artists were probing the war's subversive possibilities in its immediate aftermath.

Of course, the differences between these texts are as striking as the similarities. While Ogali's belief that persons practising polygamy in Nigeria are under siege from Christian puritanism is analogous to Okparanta's argument in *Udala Trees* that LGBTQ+ peoples are marginalised in Nigerian society because of too literal interpretations of religious texts, his argument is deeply phallogentric and supports rather than disrupts patriarchal structures. This conservative worldview is also inflected with prejudicial and potentially homophobic undertones in the passage quoted above. Indeed, Ogali contends that when he meets the dishonest people who condemn his polygamous life, he "shall treat them like fags" ("No Heaven for the Priest" 350). Granted, it is feasible that Ogali uses the term 'fag' simply to cast such peoples as inferior or subservient, which was common practice in colonial schools

in Nigeria in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> And yet, the word ‘fag’ has, since the 1920s, also been used as a derogatory way of describing male homosexuals (Zabus 92).<sup>58</sup> As such, I would argue that Ogali is also implicitly engaging with this prejudicial and sexual baggage in his use of the term, which he surely would have been cognisant of. It is also notable that Ogali chooses to use such charged language in a text ostensibly concerned with condemning the actions of clergymen during the Nigeria-Biafra war.

The disjointed coupling of queer sexual politics and the Biafran conflict in Okparanta’s and Ogali’s writings is not simply a literary or textual dynamic, however. It is also traceable in the photography of Rotimi Fani-Kayode, whose life and art were also affected by the war. The Yoruba Nigerian-British and gay photographer, who is most famous for his images of male nudes, was born in Lagos in 1955 (Hirst 35), and was thus in his early teens when the conflict broke out in July 1967. His father, Remilekun Fani-Kayode, was Deputy Premier of Western Nigeria at the time of the first military coup in January 1966, and he narrowly escaped being killed by the plotters during the operation. The family fled Lagos after the coup and sought asylum in the UK, eventually settling in Brighton as refugees (Seymour para. 7). Rotimi Fani-Kayode resided in London for most of his adult life, and he went on to produce a series of radical images of nude males with his partner Alex Hirst, such as in the photographs *Every Mother’s Son / Children of Suffering* (1989) and *Snap Shot* (1987) (see Figures 19 and 20).

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<sup>57</sup> In Terri Ochiagha’s monograph *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite* (2015) – which traces the development of modern Nigerian literature through the prism of a select group of writers’ colonial educations at Government College, Umuahia during the 1940s and 1950s – the scholar notes that the school used a ‘fagging’ system in “the English public school tradition” (49). Ochiagha reveals that “[t]he unenviable post of ‘Bell Fag’ was assigned on a weekly basis to the student with the highest number of detention hours” (52). This provides evidence that the word was in circulation in Nigeria at this time.

<sup>58</sup> As Zabus reveals in *Out in Africa*, the homophobic usage of the term becomes entwined with the idea of ‘fagging’ in public schools in an autobiographical novel by the Nigerian writer Dillibe Onyeama, which explores his schoolyears at Eton College. Onyeama’s work is provocatively titled *Nigger at Eton* (1972), and was published in the United Kingdom a year after Ogali’s “No Heaven for the Priest”. The novel portrays Onyeama’s time at Eton as being marked by experiences of racial discrimination and sexual abuse, and Zabus argues that it “helps recirculate stereotypical and exclusive identifications of homosexuality with Western mores” (93). While the Biafran war does not feature in the text, it is noteworthy that such a sexually explicit work written by a Nigerian was released in the post-war period.



Fig. 19. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Every Mother's Son/Children of Suffering*, 1989, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Autograph.



Fig. 20. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Snap Shot*, 1987, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Autograph.

While Fani-Kayode did not produce photographs that explicitly respond to the Biafran war, his elder brother Femi suggests in a BBC radio documentary that the experience of the coup “had a profound effect on [his brother]” (“An Alternative History of Art: Rotimi Fani-Kayode”). Recalling the experience of hiding in a cupboard with his siblings while their father was taken away by the coup plotters in 1966, F. Fani-Kayode reveals that “it was after that time that he started showing interest, drawing things, he was like in a world of his own from that time” (“An Alternative History of Art: Rotimi Fani-Kayode”). Although this biographical detail draws a crucial connection between Fani-Kayode’s experiences in the run-up to the Biafran crisis and his later artistic development, very little work has been done to probe the impact of the war on his career. While I do not have the space to fully unpack the significance of Biafra for Fani-Kayode’s photography in this chapter, I hope to revivify critical interest in the war as a complex touchstone influence for him as well as other diasporic Nigerian artists.

In this vein, Fani-Kayode gestures to the conflict’s significance for his life and practice in an essay titled “Traces of Ecstasy” (1988). The piece begins:

It has been my destiny to end up as an artist with a sexual taste for other young men. As a result of this, a certain distance has necessarily developed between myself and my origins. The distance is even greater as a result of my having left Africa as a refugee over 20 years ago. (Fani-Kayode para. 1)

Fani-Kayode casts his homosexuality as being bound up, in part, with the ‘distance’ he feels between himself and his Yoruba Nigerian identity as a result of fleeing from Nigeria to the UK in anticipation of the oncoming Biafran conflict. Although he does not name Biafra in the essay, he goes on to suggest that the subjective dissonance he has experienced since leaving Nigeria has had “disorienting” (Fani-Kayode para. 3) effects, producing “a sense of personal freedom from the hegemony of convention” (para. 3).

On one level, Fani-Kayode’s reflections resonate strikingly with Ekine and Abbas’s definition of queer African politics as embodying a dissident stance (4). More compelling,

however, is the implicit linkage the photographer forges between his ambivalent but seminal connection to the history of the war and his distinctive creative style:

Some Western photographers have shown that they can desire Black males (albeit rather neurotically). But the exploitative mythologising of Black virility on behalf of the homosexual bourgeoisie is ultimately no different from the vulgar objectification of Africa which we know [...] from the 'victim' images which appear constantly in the media. It is now time for us to reappropriate such images and to transform them ritualistically into images of our own creation. (Fani-Kayode para. 6)

In this passage, Fani-Kayode makes a link between the stereotyping of black men as sexual predators in the United States (Welch 276–7) and the United Kingdom (McKeown et al. 849–53), and the seemingly ubiquitous images of African victims that circulate through international media platforms: a paradigm that the Biafran war was central in propagating. As Lasse Heerten states, “[w]ithin a few weeks [in 1968], the Nigerian Civil War was turned into a humanitarian crisis on the newspaper pages and TV screens of contemporaries almost around the globe” (2). Given Biafra’s seminal significance for humanitarian discourses and iconography, it is reasonable to surmise that the war was on Fani-Kayode’s mind when he wrote “Traces of Ecstasy”, and by extension as he went about creating his subversive art.

The two photographs by Fani-Kayode reproduced above arguably engage with and transform the iconic images of emaciated children that were so central to Biafra’s international mediatisation. The title of the first photograph – *Every Mother's Son / Children of Suffering* (see Figure 19) – implicitly invokes crises such as Biafra through its reference to afflicted children, while the adult male figure portrayed and replicated in the image counters the archetypal figure of the malnourished Biafran child circulated in reports from the embattled enclave. By contrast, the second image – *Snap Shot* (see Figure 20) – resists the dominating and exploitative gaze of the Western photographers admonished by Fani-Kayode in his essay through an act of queer inversion. In the image’s mise en scène, the artist visually grafts the photographic camera – which is rendered as a phallic signifier of that colonising perspective – onto the male subject’s groin. Although, as already suggested, there is no

evidence that these photographs are deliberately reworking Biafran war imagery, the combination of Fani-Kayode's desire to reappropriate images of African victimhood in his art and the impact of the conflict on his childhood suggest that Biafra does play a vital role in his creative work.

That such a queer genealogy can be traced through Biafra's artistic legacies, from Ogali's pamphlet in 1971 to Fani-Kayode's photography produced in the 1980s and Okparanta's novel in the second decade of the twenty-first century, demonstrates the necessity of scholarship that uncovers and connects these queer traces. Indeed, another recent queer response to Biafra is recounted in Chike Frankie Edozien's memoir *Lives of Great: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man* (2017). In one section, Edozien tells the story of Area Scatter, a renowned male musician from Igboland who, as legend has it, journeyed into a forest after surviving the conflict and emerged seven months later as "a 'woman'" (103). The narrative of Area Scatter's queer transformation in the aftermath of the war recalls the gender-crossings instantiated by the Nsukka group explored in the previous chapter.

Particularly striking in all these works is the disjointed and strained way that Biafra is used by the artists to frame their queer political interventions. Gesturing to the deeper dynamics underpinning these partial engagements with the Biafran war, Fani-Kayode suggests that his fractured connection to his homeland "opens up areas of creative enquiry which might otherwise have remained forbidden. At the same time, traces of the former values remain, making it possible to take new readings on to them [*si*]' from an unusual vantage point" (para. 3). Crucial here is the idea that Fani-Kayode's 'unusual' artistic perspective, which contributes to his queerly inflected work, is in part a result of him probing issues and questions that "might otherwise have remained forbidden" (para. 3). This corresponds with Okparanta's summation of *Udala Trees* as a novel intended to write LGBTQ+ Nigerians into the nation's history, and to thus recover them from the stigmatised margins of cultural discourse ("Author's Note" para. 1). Also, while Okparanta was born and

raised in Port Harcourt in the southeast of Nigeria, she has been based in the US for many years since (*ChineloOkparanta.com*, “About the Author” para. 1); her trajectory therefore resonates to a certain degree with Fani-Kayode’s experience as a diasporic Nigerian. This suggests that her transnational perspective influences the choices she makes in her creative treatment of the war’s marginal and taboo significance in Nigeria’s cultural discourse. In order to explicate the way that taboo-inflected tropes mediate and disrupt Okparanta’s depiction both of the Biafran war and LGBTQ+ experiences, I now explore the text’s utilisation of ideas of allegory as a way of juxtaposing the two issues, which become articulated through the construction of the relationship between Ijeoma and Amina.

#### **4.5 Transmitting taboos in *Udala Trees***

The second section of the novel takes place in the period after the war. Newly reunited with her daughter, Adaora commences a series of Bible lessons designed to cleanse Ijeoma’s soul of the as-yet-unnamed but assumedly sexual ‘abomination’ she committed with Amina, a Hausa orphan of the war who Ijeoma happens across one day and adopts as a companion in her domestic labouring. This event is subsequently depicted in the third part of the narrative, which shifts back in time to tell the story of the adolescents’ blossoming relationship. Their intimate bond becomes a sexual one in the immediate aftermath of the war (*Udala Trees* 117), and they are eventually discovered together by the grammar school teacher, leading him to summon Ijeoma’s mother and separate the girls.

Adaora’s lessons consist of her forcing Ijeoma to study select passages from the Bible which, in her interpretation, proscribe same-sex relations. These include the stories of Adam and Eve’s seminal heterosexual union and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Adaora argues that in the latter story, Lot’s decision to sacrifice his daughters to the Sodomites instead of two angel visitors is justified because he wanted “to protect his guests from sin” (*Udala Trees* 73). As in this quotation, the specific nature of the transgressive relations that



Adaora condemns, and which her daughter has committed with Amina, are repeatedly left circumscribed and unnamed. When Ijeoma suggests that the Sodom and Gomorrah parable could be interpreted as “a lesson on hospitality” (*Udala Trees* 74), her mother’s response is defiant: “‘It isn’t,’ Mama said. ‘Everybody knows what lesson we should take from that story. Man must not lie with man’” (74). Adaora almost makes explicit the sin that she perceives in her daughter in this moment. However, when Ijeoma challenges this narrow interpretation by suggesting the story could have many different meanings, Adaora is forced to resort to a circumlocutory and disjointed form of expression in order to defend her position: “It had to be that other thing. It couldn’t have been anything other than that other thing” (74). This interaction demonstrates the difficulty involved in finding a language to express such a taboo without explicitly invoking it, which resonates with Freud’s description of taboo prohibitions as warding off that which is “‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’” (*Totem and Taboo* 21). As I demonstrate, this discussion of taboos in *Udala Tress* not only influences the novel’s engagement with Ijeoma’s developing lesbian identity, but also its queering portrayal of Biafra’s legacies.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud specifically speaks to the prohibition on naming that informs as well as constitutes certain taboos and neuroses. In a section explicating ‘[t]he taboo upon the dead’ (Freud 60), Freud notes that “[o]ne of the most puzzling, but at the same time instructive usages in connection with mourning is the prohibition against uttering the name of the dead person. This custom is extremely widespread, it is expressed in a variety of ways and has had important consequences” (63). Quoting heavily from the work of J. G. Frazer, Freud offers a wide-ranging account of the ways this prohibition plays out in a number of indigenous communities across the colonial map. In one such quotation, Frazer groups together the taboo practices among such diverse peoples as those “of the Nicobar Islands, of Borneo, of Madagascar, and of Tasmania” (Frazer qtd. in *Totem and Taboo* 63). Moreover, while the colonial and racist assumptions that underpin this analysis come to the

fore when Freud asserts that “obsessional neurotics behave exactly like savages in relation to names” (66), he also goes on to assert that these groups of people – problematically and reductively portrayed as they are – “show a high degree of ‘complexive sensitiveness’ in regard to uttering or hearing particular words or names” (66). This complexity, which Freud notes drives people to negatively transform feelings of love towards family members into fear and prohibition in the wake of their deaths – which is mirrored in the obsessional behaviours of neurotics – is explained as resulting from a deep-seated emotional ambivalence:

In almost every case where there is an intense emotional attachment to a particular person we find that behind the tender love there is a concealed hostility in the unconscious. This is the classical example, the prototype, of the ambivalence of human emotions. [...] It must be supposed that the presence of a particularly large amount of this original emotional ambivalence is characteristic of the disposition of obsessional neurotics – whom I have so often brought up in this discussion upon taboo. (*Totem and Taboo* 70)

Important here is Freud’s conceptualisation of taboos and neuroses as driven by ambivalent feelings, which spring from a foundational and usually concealed tension between conscious and unconscious desires. This ambivalence is a major contributing factor behind taboo proscriptions because, as Freud argues, if a person had no unconscious desire to transgress them and commit the deed despite their abominable status, there would be no need for the cultural prohibition: “one thing would certainly follow from the persistence of the taboo, namely that the original desire to do the prohibited thing must also persist” (37). While this definition cannot be mapped seamlessly onto the struggles over the language and naming of sexual taboos in *Udala Trees*, I find Freud’s articulation of the idea of ambivalence helpful in theorising that complex and queer textual resonance. In Okparanta’s novel, it is expressed through the frustrated as well as forceful delineation of desires and impulses that mediate the taboo trace.

Crucially, a measure of ambivalence is also important in Homi Bhabha’s theorisation of the ‘third space’ or hybridity produced through performative acts of colonial mimicry in

*The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha argues that “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (37). Reframing Freud’s treatment of the ambivalence integral to taboo formations, Bhabha demonstrates the applicability of this model to colonial and postcolonial contexts. I return to the question of performativity later in the chapter, but it is worth underscoring that a degree of ambivalence underpins the generative psycho-cultural models elaborated by Bhabha as well as Freud. Indeed, Bhabha has also been subject to a degree of postcolonial critique analogous to that levelled against the psychoanalyst for propounding such a formulation. For instance, Neil Lazarus argues in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011) that there is a “presumptive universalism” (32) underpinning Bhabha’s assertion that political and cultural identities are constructed through ambivalent processes of alterity. This critique of the reductive reflex in Bhabha’s work underscores the dangers involved in generalising about the very particular historical and contextual realities that inform structures both narratological and identitarian. Returning to *Udala Trees*, I now contend that a close and critical reading of the novel reveals a profound interest in exploring the kinds of ambivalent dynamics that Freud and Bhabha elucidate.

The notion that taboo prohibitions are constructed out of a complex nexus of both repellent and desirous feelings suggests that Adaora’s zealous fear about her daughter’s subversive sexuality is itself fissured by contradictory yearnings. Indeed, as Okparanta constructs Adaora as a spokesperson for homophobic religiosity in Nigeria in this early section, so the text shows the dissonances within taboo formations working to undermine those culturally-codified processes of sexual containment. It is not only Ijeoma’s transgressive relations with Amina that the text strains to express, however. Although the Nigeria-Biafra war is not mentioned in the section of dialogue between Ijeoma and her mother explored above, the very next chapter foregrounds the complexity and ambivalence

inherent in taboo formations as it tries to construct a parallel between ideas of sexual prohibition and the conflict's legacies.

Chapter 16 of *Udala Trees* opens with a verse from the Book of Leviticus: "*Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination*" (75, italics in original). This represents a continuation of the previous chapter's engagement with select Biblical fragments that ostensibly lend credence to theological arguments against same-sex relationships. In this instance, however, the verse also ties Adaora's prejudicial views more explicitly to the idea of taboo. When Ijeoma asks her to define the word 'abomination', Adaora is forced to reveal the underlying concerns promulgating her use of the term. She replies that such a thing is "disgusting, disgraceful, a scandal" (*Udala Trees* 75), adding that man "lying with mankind" (75) is an egregious example of an abomination because "it does not allow for procreation" (75). This suggests that the stigma Adaora attaches to her daughter's homosexuality is driven as much by social anxiety as by her puritanical faith, reinforcing Freud's view that "the violation of certain taboo prohibitions constitutes a social danger which must be punished or atoned for by *all* the members of the community if they are not all to suffer injury" (39, italics in original).

The sheer entanglement of impulses informing Adaora's beliefs is not fully elaborated on until after the next Biblical quotation, which is taken from Leviticus once again. It declares: "*Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed*" (*Udala Trees* 76, italics in original). Adaora immediately asks Ijeoma whether she can see the correlation between this verse and her relationship with Amina, but her daughter is utterly baffled by the question. Adaora is forced to spell out her interpretation of the verse and its significance for Ijeoma and Amina. By doing so, she binds their queer intimacy inextricably to the repercussions – both personal and socio-political – wrought by the conflict:

'I'll give you a hint. You're Igbo. That girl is Hausa. Even if she were to be a boy, don't you see that Igbo and Hausa would mean the mingling of seeds? *Don't you see?*

It would be against God's statutes.' She paused. 'Besides, are you forgetting what they did to us during the war? Have you forgotten what they did to Biafra? Have you forgotten that it was her people who killed your father?' (*Udala Trees* 76, italics in original)

This quotation reveals that Adaora's vehement repudiation of Ijeoma's actions is not only a consequence of the cultural taboo around homosexuality. It is also catalysed by the allegorical parallel she draws between queer experience and the seething ethnic politics that drove Biafra's secession and still affect its legacies. In Adaora's estimation, the particularly horrific aspect of Ijeoma's intimacy with Amina is the fact that it queerly subverts and ambivalently recasts the idea that the war represented a violent and genocidal campaign by Hausas against the Igbo. It must be underscored here that Adaora offers a starkly reductionist account of the complex nuances that played out in the conflict over Biafra. Many different ethnic groups were affected by and implicated in the secessionist crisis, and no group acted or responded in a singular fashion. However, despite the clear bias and historical inaccuracy reproduced by the character in this moment, it crucially unveils an aspect of taboo formations that underpins the novel's broader queering project.

In developing his conception of the substratal tension between conscious and unconscious desires that constructs taboo prohibitions, Freud notes that a taboo is highly transmissible and unstable:

The ease with which the prohibition can be transferred and extended reflects a process which falls in with the unconscious desire [...]. The instinctual desire is constantly shifting in order to escape from the *impasse* and endeavours to find substitutes – substitute objects and substitute acts – in place of the prohibited ones. (*Totem and Taboo* 35, italics in original).

The impasse to which Freud refers is the irreconcilable dissonance that a taboo prohibition enshrines within the psyche. In order to escape the inherent aporia and discharge the tension that builds up between the conscious and unconscious wills, taboo prohibitions constantly shift, transfiguring obsessive acts into new forms as they are projected onto different stigmatised objects. This offers a useful conceptual model for thinking about how taboos

around sexuality and the Biafran war are imperfectly aligned in Okparanta's novel. As suggested, while Adaora's prohibitive response to her daughter's homosexuality is informed by the perceived ethnic politics underpinning the war, which casts the two issues as analogous, this also involves a process of textual as well as affective transposition of the taboo. Indeed, the ambivalent and destabilising impulses that undergird and also undermine sexual prohibitions are similarly at play in responses to Biafra, where constrictive readings of its identity politics and wider cultural significance belie deeper nuances and divided loyalties. This not only helps to clarify how *Udala Trees* transplants the stigma surrounding the issue of deviant sexuality onto and commingles it, if only imperfectly, with the microcosmic political transgression Adaora believes Ijeoma to have committed with Amina. It also offers a schema for appraising the queer, formfooling and transitive dynamics that have formed a vital dimension of Biafra's broader artistic afterlives.

Biafra is not rendered as an unnameable taboo subject in the same way as homosexuality at this point in the text, however. Crucially, Adaora names the state in her explanation: "Have you forgotten what they did to Biafra?" (*Udala Trees* 76). This contrast could be a consequence of Adaora's contrasting experiences of and exposure to the two issues. The conflict represents a painful but embodied mnemonic reality for Adaora, whereas her only conscious frames of reference for same-sex desire are the discriminatory discourses and stigmas attached to it in the public sphere. And yet, the word 'Biafra' is rendered as a taboo in the third part of *Udala Trees*, which is set during the latter stages of the war and in its immediate aftermath. Ijeoma's narrative voice recalls listening to Yakubu Gowon declare the cessation of hostilities on the radio in January 1970, and she quotes a crucial passage of his speech: "The so-called Rising Sun of Biafra is set forever. It will be a great disservice for anyone to continue to use the word 'Biafra' to refer to any part of the East Central State of Nigeria" (*Udala Trees* 116). By using Ijeoma's queer narrative voice to re-focalise this part of Gowon's declaration, Okparanta not only locates a moment in the war's aftermath when the

word ‘Biafra’ became taboo. More significantly, the author also embeds this historical fragment – which further proclaims that Nigeria is “at the dawn of national reconciliation” (*Udala Trees* 116) – within the narrative’s broader project of writing LGBTQ+ Nigerians into their nation’s history. This subversive melding of taboo prohibitions against sexual diversity and Biafra works to queerly undercut the “One Nigeria” (*Udala Trees* 116) slogan that was so pervasive in federalist discourses during and after the war.

Returning to Adaora’s vexed perception of Ijeoma’s relations with Amina as a flawed and transgressive allegory of the Biafran war, this moment is also informed by and constitutive of another taboo subject. The passage in question ends with yet another resonant Freudian slip: “Have you forgotten that it was her people who killed your father?” (*Udala Trees* 76). Adaora is driven to invoke Uzo’s ghostly presence in this moment while also crucially choosing not to name him, casting his memory as a taboo prohibition inextricably linked with the war and, by extension, Ijeoma’s sexuality. That Ijeoma’s queer subjective development is presaged and affected by the loss of her father during the crisis suggests that Okparanta is deliberately engaging with and reimagining the Oedipal dynamic so central to Freudian accounts of human psychology in her reframing of the war.<sup>59</sup> While I am not suggesting that Freud’s theories are the only way of decoding the familial structures and tensions being articulated in *Udala Trees* – and indeed it would be problematic to reduce the specific social relations of people living in parts of West Africa in the mid-twentieth century to such European Enlightenment thinking – this narrative decision nevertheless resonates with such psychoanalytic thinking.

In particular, Okparanta’s reworking of the Oedipal complex aligns with the queer and feminist reframing of psychoanalysis actuated by Butler in her formulation of the ‘lesbian phallus’. Reframing Jacques Lacan’s construction of the phallus as a male-privileging signifier

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<sup>59</sup> In the final section of *Totem and Taboo*, titled “The Return of Totemism in Childhood”, Freud ties his appraisal of taboo prohibitions to the Oedipal complex. He argues: “Psycho-analysis has revealed that the totem animal is in reality a substitute for the father” (163).

– one that locates women, as Debra Roth argues, “in the position of *being* the phallus (or the object of the other’s desire) as opposed to *having* it” (182, italics in original) – Butler instead figures the phallus as “transferable, substitutable [and] plastic” (*Bodies That Matter* 89). The lesbian phallus is, for Butler, a different kind of signifier that “exceeds the purview of [...] heterosexist structuralism” (90). Butler’s lesbian reimagining of normative structures of psychological signification is reflected in Okparanta’s depiction of the Nigeria-Biafra war and its legacies, which embraces the plasticity and instability of the conflict’s cultural reception – a dynamic that this thesis argues runs through creative responses to Biafra – and redirects it along a distinctly queer trajectory.

#### 4.6 Allegories, fantasies and frames of war

Another dimension of *Udala Trees* further complicates its queer mediation of Biafra, namely, the text’s inscription of alternative representational registers and realities in the form of allegories, dreams and fantasies. I have already noted one instance in the novel when Ijeoma’s narrative voice makes a jarring textual digression in order to express and allegorise her existential vision of change. Yet the idea of allegory is invoked more explicitly in the chapter that immediately follows the passage in which Adaora analogously juxtaposes her daughter and Amina’s relationship with the ethnic politics of the war.

Embarking on another errant textual interlude, Ijeoma’s narrative voice deviates from her account of the Bible lessons to recall her father as a storyteller: “Before the war came, Papa told candlelight stories, folktales about talking animals and old kingdoms. In his nighttime voice, gruff from hours of silence at his drawing table, he told of kings and queens, of magic drums, of scheming tortoises and hares” (*Udala Trees* 78). In this passage, Ijeoma’s narrative voice switches from the fairy tale “once upon a time” (*Udala Trees* 36) lexicon that framed the textual digression I explored earlier in the chapter, to an invocation of oral legends “of magic drums” (78) and “scheming tortoises” (78), descriptions which are grounded more



firmly in local cultural traditions. But rather than retelling one of her father's imaginative stories, the narrator-protagonist chooses instead to relate a discussion they had before the war about the nature of allegory: "He spoke of allegories, and of the literal versus the figurative. He explained that certain things were symbols of other things" (*Udala Trees* 78). When Ijeoma recalls asking her father to explain what he meant by allegory, she quotes his illuminating response: "An allegory is a symbol. Something that represents something else. Maybe it is something small, a simple thing like the dove. But always, it is used to represent something very big, a larger idea, something so big that often we don't fully grasp the scope of its meaning" (*Udala Trees* 79). This moment represents the cornerstone of the novel's creative reimagining of the Biafran war through queer lenses. During his explication, Uzo crucially asserts that allegories – and by extension other forms of extra- or metanarrative fragmentation – offer a means by which people can work through experiences that cannot be contained within a singular interpretive or narrative framework, or which exceed the limits placed upon them by aesthetic forms, political agendas and cultural taboos.<sup>60</sup>

While the idea of allegory is central, I believe, to the queer treatment of the Biafran war offered in *Udala Trees*, it also carries significant theoretical baggage. In *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, McCormack raises the spectre of Frederic Jameson, who infamously argued of 'third-world literature': "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (qtd. in McCormack 6). This problematic fomented a vibrant debate about "whether allegory was (or was not) the plight of the postcolonial writer" (McCormack 6).<sup>61</sup> Although McCormack does not reject Jameson's assertion, she nonetheless contends that "there has been little mention in

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<sup>60</sup> The literary critic Kerry Manzo also explores the significance of allegory in *Udala Trees*, arguing that "Okparanta allegorises the war in order to critique both ethnocentric and heteronormative aspects of nationalist discourses" (155).

<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the most famous critique of Jameson's formulation is provided by Aijaz Ahmad. As Ahmad puts it, "Jameson's is not a first-world text, mine is not a third-world text. We are not each other's civilizational Others" (25). For a response to Ahmad, see Lazarus's *The Postcolonial Unconscious*.

postcolonial studies of why non-normative embodiment or sexual desires are allegorically significant” (6). One of the ways that queer bodies and desires affect postcolonial allegories, so McCormack asserts, is by “continually presenting an embodied tale that is in excess of and therefore uncontainable by the narrative form” (103–4). The allegorical and queer concatenations inscribed in *Udala Trees* arguably express such textual excess, contributing to the dense layering of narrative forms and genres that constitute the novel. This reading also resonates with Walter Benjamin’s conception of allegory as, to quote Matthew Wilkens, “a response to a crisis in representation” (292). Although Benjamin’s formulation focuses on the “crisis that was brought on in the Baroque era by the waning of Christian hermeneutic hegemony prior to the clear emergence of an alternative worldview” (Wilkens 292), the notion that periods of socio-political and cultural instability are powerful catalysts for such allegorical artistry is highly suggestive for this study of Biafra’s creative legacies.

Although Uzo provides Ijeoma with a model for retrospectively remediating her experiences during and after the war, it also casts the conflict as a queer imaginative space capable of framing as well as expressing the narrative of her lesbian awakening, both in spite and because of cultural taboos that haunt these two concerns. Hoogland helps to further theorise the political-aesthetic and allegorical potential of queer figures such as Ijeoma in her elaboration of a radical lesbian critique of cultural praxis via Freudian psychoanalysis. She argues that “the ‘lesbian-bodied subject’ represents a subversive element capable of profoundly destabilizing the dominant system of power/gender relations” (Hoogland 54). While this tallies with both Ahmed’s account of the queer work involved in lesbian orientation and Butler’s conceptualisation of the re-signifying power of the lesbian phallus, Hoogland further asserts:

Drawing on her embodied ‘knowledge’ of alternative modes of being, the lesbian subject – just as, incidentally, any other psychosexual ‘deviant’ – is in an excellent position actively to employ her subversive desire in the production of different stories, myths, and fantasies about a sociocultural material reality of which she forms part, but in which she nonetheless figures as an ‘impossibility’. (54)

This suggests that Ijeoma's very textual presence in the novel – both as its intra-diegetic protagonist and extra-diegetic narrator – produces subversive as well as generative narrative effects. Indeed, the complex structure of Ijeoma's tale in *Udala Trees*, which unravels nonchronologically and reflexively, resonates with another of Butler's assertions, namely that “[m]y account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. [...] My efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision” (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 40). In conjunction with Hoogland's argument, Butler's assertion implies that any queer subject position or creative form – such as the ones enshrined in the works of Ogalie and Fani-Kayode – produces nuanced repercussions. Rather than simply concluding that Biafra has been the subject or object of these queering dynamics, however, another aspect of Hoogland's argument opens up a way of conceiving of the war's legacies as queering as well as queered psycho-creative ground.

Hoogland traces the subversive power of the lesbian-subject to the material formation of sexuality and the ego in the psyche. She argues that they share a “common location in some sort of interspace, their shared metapsychological status of ‘borderline cases’” (Hoogland 52). Drawing on Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis's model of psychological ‘fantasy’ to explain the significance of this interstitial formulation, Hoogland further asserts that “[w]hat distinguishes the phantasmatic from other modes of reality is [...] the profoundly ambivalent status of the phantasizing instance, who figures neither as subject nor as object of desire, but rather part of the scene itself” (53). Although Hoogland frames this ‘phantasmatic’ mode as an individual psychological phenomenon, it also shares some of the aesthetic properties that underpin artistic and textual creations. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suggest that the complex history of the Biafran war which, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is marked by deep ambivalences and instability, represents such a setting.

The Nigeria-Biafra conflict has, since its inception, represented fertile ground for queer interventions – for narrative allegorisations as well as artistic transformations – which recalls Stephen Clingman’s account of navigation as a transitive process underpinned by associative as well as substitutive metonymic structures (15). However, the haunting ‘impossibility’ of such a deviant subject position – as both Butler and Hoogland assert – highlights a political limit to the transformative power of such queer navigations. Such impossibility may have productive and resistant effects when utilised in discursive or abstract forms, as the above analysis has attempted to theorise. Yet it is difficult to see how a conceptualisation of queer subjectivity as always partially unreadable and unlocatable within normative frameworks helps to improve the material conditions of LGBTQ+ people living in repressive socio-political situations. In order to ponder these limits, I conclude this section by referring back to Butler’s work on framing in relation to wars.

As noted in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis, Butler employs the term ‘frame’ to conceptualise the various formations – from the discursive and material to the political and ethical – which structure the ways lives are recognised as well as sustained (*Frames of War* 23–4). These frames are deployed and manipulated in order to render some lives more grievable, or precarious, than others. Butler goes on to assert that “frames are subject to an iterable structure – they can only circulate by virtue of their reproducibility, and that very reproducibility introduces a structural risk for the identity of the frame itself” (*Frames of War* 24). The instability wrought by this iterative form, so Butler contends, is the very ground upon which “a politically consequential break is possible” (*Frames of War* 24); where the fields of normativity that determine those frames can be called into question. Yet this fissuring potential of frames – which enshrines the possibility of anti-normative resistance that can have queer effects – does not necessarily produce liberating or ethical consequences. Indeed, Butler draws attention to instances where progressive conceptions of feminist politics and sexual freedom have been mobilised to rationalise war efforts despite

being ostensibly discrete concerns, such as in “wars against predominantly Muslim populations, [and] also to argue for limits to immigration to Europe from predominantly Muslim countries” (*Frames of War* 26). Sexual politics are one of several social concerns that can be utilised for these purposes, and it is precisely because of the fissuring process involved in the iteration of frames that a diverse range of issues can become articulated to and embedded in the representational field that structures perceptions of a conflict.

While these examples do not speak to the particular dynamics involved in the historical development and artistic heritage of the Nigeria-Biafra war, Butler’s analysis is helpful in the way it explains how sexual politics and narratives of wars such as the Biafran conflict can become entwined through processes whereby norms are framed, sedimented and destabilised. The large and diverse body of artistic works that respond to the struggle and its legacies can therefore be seen to represent a dynamic, queering, but also potentially normalising corpus. Speaking to this issue, McCormack, who engages with Butler’s formulation in *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, argues that “the constraining effect of copying and repeating should not be abandoned simply because it may be politically desirable to show how agency can be exercised in the context of colonial occupation” (18).

Distinguishing between pedagogical and performative structures of power, where the former process sediments norms and the latter produces fissures within and between them, McCormack disagrees that sites of performativity should be privileged over those of pedagogy. Instead, and by reiterating her broader argument that power – colonial and otherwise – “asserts its authority through, in and on the body” (McCormack 18), McCormack goes on to contend that “[t]he appeal of norms is [...] not only about conformity and the desire or pressure to be like everyone else, but also the embodied sense of belonging and the viscosity of recognition” (18). Following McCormack’s lead, I contend that Biafra’s queer status as totem and taboo, both within as well as beyond Nigeria, has helped to produce a complex but generative creative tradition for artists. It has carved out a

cultural space where political questions and aesthetic modes can be remediated despite the dangers that have faced LGBTQ+ people and groups agitating for another Biafran secession.

I engage further with McCormack's conception of embodied witness later in the chapter, during a section which considers how processes of queer embodiment instantiate precarious acts of intersubjective communication in *Udala Trees*. It is important to note at this stage, however, that McCormack does not elaborate on the institutional and commercial forces that drive queer literary formations and allegories. Such an engagement is necessary, I believe, when considering artistic artefacts such as the artworks of Okparanta, Fani-Kayode and Ogali. As the next section demonstrates, they not only reframe Biafran war narratives and iconography through subversive sexual politics and allegorisation, but they participate in various cultural markets as creative commodities from and of the African continent as well.

#### **4.7 Commodifying Biafra's queer limits**

Discussing the development of 'African literature' as a consecrated body of writing within the global literary field, Madhu Krishnan argues that it "has been defined by a series of uneasy relationships with the market dynamics of the publishing industry and public perception, resulting in a mode of canonisation which is inevitably political in its consequences" (*Contingent Canons* 4). While such dynamics are certainly at play in artistic responses to Biafra, it is important to keep in mind the contrasting forces that affect different cultural fields and markets, and to remember that not all works by Nigerians that engage with the conflict's legacies are impacted by them equally. For instance, as Ogali's writings have not been disseminated widely outside of Nigeria, the kinds of market pressures weighing on his works are very different to those influencing Okparanta's *Udala Trees*, which was first published in the US and has gone on to receive international acclaim. However, despite these clear differences, I maintain that these Biafra-oriented works all engage with the commercial implications of their contents, which rework the war's significance in queer ways.

Fani-Kayode, for one, makes plain in his essay “Traces of Ecstasy” that his photographs reappropriate the kinds of ‘victim’ images that were so widely circulated during and after the Biafran war. This suggests that regardless of his creative or taboo-breaking intentions, he also takes advantage of the hypervisibility of such icons to bolster interest in his work. Such a foregrounding of the photographer’s engagement with global media trends is supported by Olu Oguibe in his essay “Finding a Place: Nigerian Artists in the Contemporary Art World”. Grouping Fani-Kayode with a range of other internationally regarded Nigerian artists, Oguibe argues that while the photographer was “a thorough outsider” (270), he “did not detach himself from the mainstream even as he critiqued it. He recognized that the cracks that emerged within it were better taken advantage of (in order to further open it up), rather than shunned” (270). While I find Oguibe’s account of Fani-Kayode’s critical investment in the global artistic mainstream persuasive, I would add that – as with Oguibe’s career – the peculiar legacies of the Biafran war were particularly significant in the development of Fani-Kayode’s queer form of engagement with the international art market.

Similarly, Okparanta makes an astute commercial choice by refracting the narrative of Biafra through queer lenses, which makes her novel stand out from many of the books that portray the war. This dynamic is most clearly evidenced by Okparanta’s decision to distance her novel from the all-conquering *Yellow Sun*, which the author claimed not to have read in a 2012 interview (“Female, Nigerian and haunted by Biafra” para. 3). That Okparanta feels obliged to foreground the distinctiveness of *Udala Trees* while simultaneously inviting comparisons between it and Adichie’s work illustrates the different kinds of forces at play when a Nigerian writer chooses to make an intervention in the corpus of Biafran war narratives and African letters more broadly. As Krishnan rightly puts it, “[n]o author has become as representative of African literature as [...] Adichie” (*Contingent Canons* 50), so Okparanta’s response to this comparison is revealing. By situating sections of her queering

novel in the period of the conflict, Okparanta carves out a space for herself in the same tradition of portrayals of Biafra that elevated Adichie to the status of a global literary star. Furthermore, as my analysis of *Yellow Sun* in the thesis's introduction laid bare some of the queer complexities at play in Adichie's canonical work, it is clear that a myriad of complex parallels and discontinuities exist between these two novels.

Finally, while Ogali's pamphlets have not circulated far beyond Nigeria's borders, he was also keenly aware of the publishing structures and market forces that influenced his works' reception. Reinhard W. Sander reveals in an introduction to Ogali's writings that "unlike a number of other Onitsha Market writers, [he] preferred to publish the majority of his pamphlets himself" (Sander xii). This was because of an unfortunate experience earlier in Ogali's career when he became "mixed up with two publishers" (Sander xii) over the re-release of his popular pamphlet *Veronica My Daughter* in 1956. As both publishers brought out different versions of the text, the subsequent High Court case led to Ogali losing out on the royalties for the pamphlet's sales (Sander xii). As such, it seems unlikely that the writer would produce a polemical tract engaging with the war if he did not think it would turn a profit. Indeed, the fact that he would go on to publish a second pamphlet on the war, titled *The Return of Ojukwu and Why Biafra Lost the War* (1982), seems to confirm the marketability of such literature.

This analysis serves to illustrate that queer and subversive reappropriations of the Biafran conflict are not simply ethical or political projects, but that they are also fervently engaged with the markets that commodify such creations. Each of the works studied in this chapter subverts certain norms and frames in order to take advantage of others, particularly the international media exposure and commercial interest that Biafra has garnered. I now delve deeper into the layering of different registers and realities perceived in Okparanta's novel, offering a reading of the text's exploration of queer dreams and intersubjective communication.



#### 4.8 Oneiric mediations and (im)material embodiment

As previously noted, the narrative of *Udala Trees* does not simply reconstruct the experiences of Ijeoma and her mother in the aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra war. Rather, it produces a disjointed narrative form that is supplemented by a series of textual digressions, from fragments of oral tales to mnemonic flashbacks. A crucial aspect of this queer novelistic structure, which continually exceeds the limits of Ijeoma's story by overlaying it with various kinds of textual material, is the preponderance of dreams in the work. In this section, I elucidate the significance of moments of oneiric and (im)material mediation by drawing once again from Freud's psychoanalytic models. I then go beyond these theoretical foundations by referencing more contemporary studies of the structures and potentialities of dreaming and other phantasmatic experiences in African and wider postcolonial contexts. While my main focus in the latter part of this chapter is the dream-work contained in *Udala Trees*, it is also important to highlight the prevalence of oneiric instances in the broader body of creative works that explore Biafra's legacies.

Towards the end of Chris Abani's novel *Song for Night*, for instance, the narrator-protagonist My Luck observes of his surroundings that "[m]irages are common here" (141). This remark is the culmination of a surreal section of the text, where the child soldier perceives, or perhaps hallucinates, a train coursing through the dense jungle that surrounds him. At an earlier point in the novel, My Luck's narrative voice gives a fuller sense of the effect of such dream-like moments on his experience of the war: "It is a curious experience – to be inside your dream and outside it, lucid and yet sleeping deeply. But in this war so much has happened to make even this seem normal" (Abani, *Song for Night* 48). While these observations respond to a specific situation and environment, they also gesture to a broader preoccupation with dreaming and other modes of oneiric mediation in the Biafran war arts. I use the idea of oneiric mediation to describe moments in these narratives when

phantasmatic representations of reality and perception come to the fore, instances that also involve visions and hallucinations. As such, I want to probe the significance and recurrence of oneiric mediation in *Udala Trees* in order to tease out their wider implications for Biafra's cultural afterlives.

At the beginning of Chapter 5, and several weeks after the fateful bombing raid that took her father's life, Ijeoma asks her mother whether she misses him. In response, Adaora reveals that Uzo's death has thrown her mind into turmoil. She explains that she feels "[a]nger [...] toward him. Anger. Sometimes I feel like I will just explode with it" (*Udala Trees* 25). The seething emotional fault line that Uzo's death rips through Adaora's psyche finally erupts in the aftermath of this exchange, when the mother and daughter sleep next to each other on the parlour floor. Ijeoma remembers that

[a]t something like one or two a.m. on the night of Mama's anger confession, her scream came piercing a hole into the darkness, a hole so big that I felt as if I were spiraling at full speed down the length of it.

'Uzo!' she cried. Never before had I heard her scream this way in her sleep. (*Udala Trees* 26).

Adaora's somnolent outburst makes plain the impact of the war. It is a visceral expression of her suffering and a symptom of the psychological trauma that she has undergone. Yet this moment also provides Ijeoma's fertile imagination with an opportunity to make a further narrative digression: to meditate, crucially, on the power and significance of dreams:

Mama used to say that our dreams were the way in which we resolved our problems, that every problem could be solved if we paid close attention to the tiniest details in our dreams. I used to have those dreams where I would get stuck in my sleep and couldn't move. [...] Eventually I would resign myself to being stuck. Only then would I somehow come out of it. (*Udala Trees* 26).

As with some of the earlier passages quoted from the novel, this moment of dream-thinking is not explicitly tied to the development and impact of the Nigeria-Biafra war. And yet, significant here is the emphasis placed on psychological processes, which are once again foregrounded in a text more broadly framed by memories of the conflict. This suggests that

dreams and other instances of oneiric mediation form a vital facet of the queer dynamics and ambivalent ground that Okparanta articulates through her adaptation of Biafra. Moreover, the fact that it is Adaora who first gives Ijeoma the idea that dreams provide insights into a person's desires as well as their problems demonstrates that these creative negotiations are also informed by intergenerational relations and inheritances. Ijeoma's recollection that she could only break free from the constraints of dreams once she accepted their forceful presence provides another metonymic model for thinking through Biafra's broader affects and afterlives.

Functioning as an imaginative, socio-political and psychological sticking point in Nigeria's cultural psyche, the Biafran conflict has acted as a supremely productive setting for artistic invention and interrogation since the 1960s. It has also produced indefatigably queer dynamics through this process of creative reformation. Hoogland's work on psychological fantasy and subversive sexuality, which synthesises the dream theories of Freud and Laplanche and Pontalis, helps to shed further light on these developments. Hoogland argues that in Freud's exploration of "the function of fantasy in the psychosexual process, [he] introduced the notion [of] 'psychical reality'" (46). Although Hoogland reveals that Freud "[s]ometimes [...] uses the phrase to refer to the contents of [conscious] thought" (46), she is more interested in his overlapping identification of psychical reality as "a field in which also unconscious contents, such as dreams, have a place" (46). Quoting from Laplanche and Pontalis's reworking of Freudian theory, Hoogland goes on to assert that a dream

forms a 'heterogeneous nucleus' within psychical reality, a 'resistant element, alone truly real', consisting of 'unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape' [...]. In one word: fantasy. This scheme thus leaves us with three different realities: a material, a psychological and a phantasmatic one. (46)

In this quotation, dreams are framed as phantasmatic and resistant psychological phenomena that mediate unconscious wishes. Hoogland also goes on to suggest that oneiric experiences can result in the repression of those desires and also in the return of the repressed (47).

As my earlier analysis in this chapter indicated, Biafra has arguably represented such a repressed irritant in Nigerian cultural discourse since 1970. Given that dreams represent fantasy forms that function at “the *interface* between body and desire” (Hoogland 53, italics in original), they are useful tools for artists because they work across different levels of physical and psychical reality. And yet, Hoogland also sketches out the particular ramifications of such a phantasmatic reading of dreams for the formation of sexual identities: “The open-ended and interactive nature of the imaginary process entails that the subject may – by, for instance, phantasmatically participating in non-heterosexual settings of desire – change or actually abandon her/his ‘appropriate’ position with regard to the love-object” (49). Returning to Ijeoma’s meditation on dreaming at the beginning of *Udala Trees*, Hoogland’s account of the phantasmatic potential of such phenomena suggests that even before the narrator-protagonist tells the story of her subversive sexual awakening, the multi-layered text is already inscribed with these resistant possibilities. This, in turn, provides further support for a reading of the conflict as a queer setting where such dynamics can be opened up and renegotiated.

Processes of (im)material and oneiric mediation go on to play a more explicit role in expressing Ijeoma’s burgeoning lesbian identity later in the novel. Indeed, a discussion about dreams presages the sexual encounter between Ijeoma and Amina that ultimately leads to their separation. Lying together on a mattress, the girls share stories of dreams they have had. Both recall a fearful dream of rising inexorably from the ground, which Amina suggests “means you will continue to rise, but eventually you will fall” (*Udala Trees* 122). This shared anxiety about the potential consequences of their actions becomes amplified after they are discovered together, with both characters later suffering from disturbing nightmares that tell of their coming damnation (*Udala Trees* 155 and 197). Yet long before these issues come to a head in the text, Ijeoma asks Amina if she has heard of “Joseph and his dreams” (*Udala*

*Trees* 122). Ijeoma's narrative voice recalls that after telling Amina the story of Joseph's travails with his brothers, Amina

sighed and pressed herself against me. 'I don't understand why God made them to first have to go through all that wahala. [...] It's like going around in a circle instead of taking a straight line home. Doesn't make any sense to me.'

I said, 'maybe sometimes it's worth it to go around in circles. Maybe you learn more lessons that way.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'But I suppose that could be true.' (*Udala Trees* 123)

In this dialogue, both the performative form of dreaming and its pedagogical value are interrogated. While Amina is sceptical about the usefulness of such circuitous allegorising, Ijeoma argues that such a queer and longwinded approach might in fact produce deeper levels of understanding. Ijeoma's viewpoint arguably resonates with McCormack's argument that not all forms of pedagogical knowledge and norm formation are bad. Of greater significance, however, is the fact that Ijeoma's exchange with Amina is framed by a moment of physical contact: Amina is described as "press[ing] herself against" (*Udala Tree* 123) Ijeoma.

On the one hand, this description reinforces McCormack's related claim that norms are produced through the sedimentation of power, which is enacted through, in and on the body (18). On the other, the subsequent depiction of sexual intercourse between the pair – during which Ijeoma's narrative voice asserts that "I moaned and surrendered myself to her" (*Udala Trees* 124) – resonates with McCormack's bolder assertion that queer forms of embodiment and touch can represent precarious acts of intersubjective communication. Building on Margrit Shildrick's assertion in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002) that "[t]o touch and be touched speaks to our exposure to, and immersion in, the world of others" (117), McCormack further elaborates on this ethics of vulnerability: "To risk one's self is not to sacrifice who one is [...] or to invite violence; it is to be open to the touch of others and to being transformed by this intimacy" (71). In this way, the sexual encounter between Ijeoma and Amina in *Udala Trees*, which is presaged by a discussion of

oneiric and phantasmatic reality, could be seen to represent such a moment of mutual witnessing and transformation.

Such a dynamic is also at play in other artistic responses to Biafra. As my analysis of Catherine Acholonu's play *Into the Heart* in the first chapter revealed, there is a moment in the drama when two wounded male characters – Chume and General Blood – are forced to become physically intimate in order to survive (*IHB* 76–7). By opening their vulnerable bodies and subjectivities to one another through modes of touch, they also have to transgress the gendered and sexual norms that separate them. And yet, as Ahmed notes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “[t]ouch also involves an economy: a differentiation between those who can and cannot be reached. [...] Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy” (107). While the intimacy shared by characters in both *Udala Trees* and *Into the Heart* reinscribes the possibility of more co-existential modes of interaction and experience being affected in the aftermath of the Biafran war, such queer reorientations come with no guarantees of meaningful change.

The production of precarious forms of intersubjective connection in *Udala Trees* also corresponds with studies of the specific formation of oneiric experience in African contexts. For example, in an article appraising the significance of dreaming across the African continent, Augustine Nwoye argues that “[i]n the African perspective, one can dream not only about oneself or one's problems, but also about the life and concerns of another person” (100). Such a phenomenon, Nwoye further contends, “means that the source of dream insight and guidance in the African context is not always personal, nor does it always originate from the beneficiary's unconscious” (10). Although Nwoye's generalist account risks conflating the experiences of the continent's supremely diverse populations and cultures, his work nevertheless resonates with more targeted studies of dreaming in Igbo social settings. For instance, in the essay collection *Dreaming, Religion and Society in Africa* (1992), Keith Ray offers a detailed analysis of the role of dreaming in the candidacy for religious office in

different parts of Igboland. Noting the “number of cases where dreams are mentioned as the medium whereby the call to office is first communicated” (Ray 67), Ray demonstrates the material as well as spiritual significance of dreaming in Igbo contexts. In relation to *Udala Trees*, these scholarly studies propose that the intermingling of subjectivities enacted during moments of oneiric mediation in the text inscribes it with a distinctly Igbo and African resonance.

The significance of dreams in the narrative is further articulated after Ijeoma’s husband Chibundu reveals that he has been hiding love letters sent from Ndidì to Ijeoma (*Udala Trees* 281). Threatening Ijeoma with violence if she continues to resist his patriarchal authority – “Whatever you do, don’t provoke me, or I will see to it that you pay the price” (*Udala Trees* 283) – Chibundu makes plain the dangers involved in such assertions of queer desire. This threat underscores McCormack’s contention that tactile interactions can be used to enact violence as well as to forge ethical forms of intersubjectivity (100). Such instances, where the destructive capacities of dreams are expressed in the novel, point more broadly to the psychological as well as physical and political risks involved in reworking the phantasmatic material of the Biafran war through art. Many Nigerian artists and citizens have, to use Chibundu’s phrase, paid the price for manipulating Biafra’s dissident and queer potential. Notably, the draconian response of Nigerian state forces to recent protests calling for a second Biafran secession have served to demonstrate not only the sheer elasticity of the war’s significance in the country, but also the terrible acrimony and violence that its rearticulation is capable of provoking.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to note, however, that no mention of the war is made in this or any of the other letters uncovered by Chibundu. As such, the novel’s disjointed and queer

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<sup>62</sup> One high profile group trying to remobilise the Biafran secessionist movement is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which was founded by Nnamdi Kanu (Tayo paras. 6–8). In January 2017, fifteen pro-Biafran protestors were allegedly shot by security forces in Port Harcourt, and many more were arrested (Iheanachor para. 1).

treatment of the war's aftermath also suggests that understanding of the conflict's visceral impact risks being hollowed out through repeated reimaginings. Indeed, every new creative framing of the conflict has the potential to erase the mnemonic and historical vitality of Biafra even as they imbue the war with different allegorical and political meanings. In order to work through these complexities, it is necessary to consider the significance of dreams in the novel's latter stages. It is at the close of *Udala Trees*, I argue, that the importance of oneiric mediation for the text's queer engagement with Biafra's legacies is most powerfully demonstrated.

#### 4.9 Deceptive dreams and erratic epiphanies

Dreams play a major role in the final chapters of Okparanta's novel. Indeed, it is after Ijeoma dreams of udala trees following the miscarriage of her second child that she decides to leave Chibundu, taking their daughter Chidinma away with her. The eponymous tree plays a minor but symbolic role in the narrative up to this point, with the first encounter between Ijeoma and Amina taking place beneath an udala tree (*Udala Trees* 104). However, it is at the beginning of Chapter 77 that the protagonist's narrative voice reveals the deeper mythical-spiritual significance of the titular tree:

Legend has it that spirit children, tired of floating aimlessly between the world of the living and that of the dead, take to gathering under udala trees. In exchange for the dwelling, they cause to be exceptionally fertile any female who comes and stays, for even the briefest period of time, under any one of the trees. (*Udala Trees* 308)

This revelation, which takes the form of another imaginative digression from the central narrative, has important ramifications for the reader's understanding of Ijeoma's queer trajectory. On the one hand, it suggests that Ijeoma and Amina – who first meet under an udala tree – embody some of the characteristics of the spirit children in the legend, which are liminal and ambiguous figures endowed with supernatural powers of fertility. Yet such an allegorical reading of the spirit children legend is thrown into doubt in the novel. Ijeoma's



narrative voice subsequently recalls being sceptical of the patriarchal and heteronormative conventions undergirding the legend, particularly the “obligation to be fertile” (*Udala Trees* 310) that it implicitly involves. Ijeoma even goes on to assert that “the gap between legend and reality [in the story] was not one that [her] mind was prepared to leap across” (310). This implies that her suspicion extends beyond this story to all products of fantasy and the imagination, even those that push the limits of norms and queer conventional cultural frameworks.

In this way, the novel arguably engages in a process of critical but also opaque representation. Such a narrative modality arguably reflects Nicole Simek’s assertion that Freudian psychoanalysis and its postcolonial inheritors – most notably distilled in the writings of Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant – articulate a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (235). Drawing principally from Paul Ricoeur’s work in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (first published in French in 1965), Simek defines this hermeneutics of suspicion as “go[ing] beyond the surface of things, rejecting the long-held philosophical belief that ‘in consciousness, meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide’” (Simek 235). For Simek, psychoanalysis’s scepticism towards transparent or positivist approaches to hermeneutics means that “a resistance to interpretive mastery” (236) is hardwired into the discipline. This vein of hermeneutic resistance and opacity is, I believe, central to the queer and oneiric negotiations undertaken in the narrative of *Udala Trees*. Indeed, as I argue in the conclusion to this thesis, the broader corpus of artistic responses to Biafra should be read as engaging in a speculative and opaque mode of semiotic expression and hermeneutic interrogation.

Returning to the latter sections of *Udala Trees*, the epilogue, which is set just days after the signing into law of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in Nigeria, begins with this pregnant assertion: “In a life story full of dreams, there are even more dreams” (*Udala Trees* 315). While this declaration serves to continue the proliferation of oneiric visions and narrative excesses that litter the preceding text, it also frames the novel’s final three dream-

fragments. In all three of the dreams, Ijeoma attempts to communicate and connect with her lost love Amina, but her efforts are repeatedly frustrated (*Udala Trees* 315–7). While this final sequence of dreams is deeply stained with the seemingly endless loss of Amina from Ijeoma’s life, which undercuts the conciliatory and uplifting tone that imbues much of the epilogue to *Udala Trees*, the portrayal of the three dreams is also truncated by a final reference to the legacies of Biafra.

Immediately after describing her second dream, Ijeoma’s narrative voice offers another dissonant textual digression:

Gowon had said in his speech: *The tragic chapter of violence is just ended. We are at the dawn of national reconciliation. Once again, we have an opportunity to build a new nation.*

Forget that Gowon was a Northerner. Forget that his name is synonymous with the war and its atrocities.

But remember that war and its atrocities, and remember the speech, and remember that aspect of national reconciliation, and of the building of a new nation.

Forgive Gowon. Forgive Ojukwu. And forgive the war. (*Udala Trees* 316, italics in original)

This textual fragment takes the form of an indirect and interpellative plea to the reader, working to reframe understanding of Gowon’s victory speech. Mediating its political message and impact through a series of asymmetrical oppositions and ambivalent articulations, the passage balances ideas of remembering with forgetting, atrocity with reconciliation, and ultimately Nigeria with Biafra. By doing so, it makes an argument for the absolution of the conflict’s complex legacies. This rhetorical refashioning of Gowon’s words in *Udala Trees* supports Godwin Onuoha’s assertion – made in relation to Biafra – “that coming to terms with a painful past is critical to the task of nation building and the legitimacy of a government, and serves as a basis for social cohesion within nation states that need to find collective meaning in such memories” (“The presence of the past” 2195). Yet neither Nigeria nor the secessionist state are named in this queerly inserted moment of meta-textual and historical mediation in Okparanta’s novel. This decision not only reinforces the taboo prohibition that *Udala Trees* more broadly interrogates, but it also undercuts the narrator’s conciliatory

reappraisal of Gowon's words. Indeed, rather than making a convincing or final case for the war's atonement, the text can only offer a partial and patchy appraisal of its significance. For, even as *Udala Trees* strives to enact a form of socio-historical amnesty, this discursive act is counterbalanced and fissured by traces of denial, occlusion and inconclusivity. The deeper queering force of this ambivalent plea can be explicated through another reference to Freudian theory.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud uses an analysis of the structure of dreams to further complicate his account of taboo prohibitions. The psychoanalyst asserts:

When we come to submit a dream to interpretation, we find that the erratic and irregular arrangement of its constituent parts is quite unimportant from the point of view of our understanding of it. The essential elements in a dream are the dream-thoughts, and these have meaning, connection and order. But their order is quite other than that remembered by the manifest content of the dream. (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 110)

Freud's conceptualisation of dreams as "erratic" (*Totem and Taboo* 110) and "irregular" (110) tallies with my analysis of the truncated form of Ijeoma's final dreams, which are interspersed with a seemingly disconnected appeal to the reader to forgive Biafra and its legacies. Crucial to the psychoanalyst's formulation, however, is the additional assertion that dreams undergo a secondary revision during their reinterpretation in the conscious mind. As Freud further argues: "There is an intellectual function in us which demands unity, connection and intelligibility from any material [...]; and if [...] it is unable to establish a true connection, it does not hesitate to fabricate a false one" (*Totem and Taboo* 111). The psychoanalyst develops his account of the confusing forms of dreams and taboos by insisting that our understanding of them is largely determined by processes of retrospective ordering and fabrication. As such, the perplexing plea made on behalf of the war's legacies at the close of *Udala Trees* should not only be viewed as a queer dissonance introduced to reinforce the reader's disjointed experience of the narrative. It also forms a crucial part of the novel's reflexive, oneiric and formfooling reimagining of the war through queer lenses.

Taking up Freud's theorisation of the structure of dreams, Herschel Farbman attests that "[i]f our dreams deceive us, [...] it is because words couldn't continue to come to us at all if we could speak to ourselves directly, without any detour through figures of the outside world from which words come and to which they return" (47). I would argue that the Biafran war has continually functioned as such a creative detour and marginal setting in the Nigerian arts since the late 1960s. Employing Biafra as a queer interspace capable of producing moments of oneiric mediation and (im)material embodiment, artists have defied attempts to banish it from or reconcile it within Nigeria's discursive field. Although there is certainly a pressing danger of Biafra being drained of its historical specificity – of the war's multiple afterlives being reduced to a hollow and insipid cultural signifier – a vital degree of disruptive ambivalence has always haunted responses to the Biafran war and its aftermath. To conclude this chapter, I explore the possibility of conceptualising Biafra as a utopian as well as queer and oneiric preoccupation in the Nigerian arts. Although such a configuration risks emptying the idea of Biafra of its historical specificity and materiality, I argue that it also expresses the highly generative possibilities of the war's patchy fabric for the arts.

#### **4.10 Coda: Biafra as a queer and transformative "nowhere"?**

In an article exploring postcolonial writings from the Caribbean, Bill Ashcroft argues that a utopian function underpins this body of work. For Ashcroft, the consequence of this utopian impulse, an idea which he adapts from Ricoeur's study of the subject, is that the phantasmatic imagining of an alternative world or society – its exteriorisation as "nowhere" (Ricoeur qtd. in Ashcroft 91) – represents one of the most radical contestations of reality (Ashcroft 108). As Ashcroft further asserts: "The utopian function of [...] postcolonial writing [...] lies not in the perception of a utopia but in its very determination that the world could be different, that change is possible" (108). This transformative modality, which in postcolonial arts instantiates non-nationalistic ideas of nowhere and home, is also predicated on a process of

oneiric mediation. As Ashcroft subsequently reveals, quoting from Ricoeur once more, the “daydream transposed into art is a form of ‘world extension’” (Ashcroft 106).

There is much that deserves to be drawn out of Ashcroft’s account. However, of particular relevance to this chapter is the notion that dreams in art possess both a utopian and transformative function: one that can counter the nationalist imperative perceived in many postcolonial arts. On the one hand, this adds a vital layer of significance to my earlier analysis of *Udala Trees* and other queer reworkings of Biafra. It suggests that the subversive visions of change that course through these representations should be viewed as engaging in a radical reappraisal of the fundamental conceptual ground that undergirds understanding of the war and its afterlives. Indeed, it implies that the distinctly queer significance and transitive development of the idea of Biafra has enabled such striking re-envisionings of the ethical, aesthetic and political structures of Nigeria to be undertaken. Yet by conceptualising the secessionist state as a utopian idea or topography, as a ‘nowhere’ that artists can project new visions onto at will, there is also a danger that the lived experiences of people who have struggled for the Biafran cause become erased. In doing so, artists risk reinforcing the war’s taboo status even as they strive to probe and complicate it.

Okparanta’s refusal to name Biafra in the epilogue and the “Author’s Note” to *Udala Trees* arguably serves to reinforce this cultural marginalisation. Indeed, Wole Soyinka engages with this rhetorical reflex in his essay collection *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Reflection of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996):

There are of course those dissenting biographers and historians, the Establishment recordkeepers who insist on writing and speaking of Biafra in inverted commas, in a coy, sanctimonious denial of reality. We should even encourage them to write it *B--ra* or invent any other childish contrivance, like a literary talisman programmed to create a lacuna in a history that dogs our conscience and collective memory; every day still reminds us that the factors that led to Biafra neither were ephemeral nor can be held to be permanently exorcised. (32)

With characteristic flair, Soyinka locates the taboo formation at the heart of Biafra’s legacies: one that has contributed to its status as a cultural lacuna in Nigeria. Particularly striking,

however, is the way Soyinka suggests that it is as a “literary talisman” (*The Open Sore* 32) that Biafra has become such divisive and spectral ground. This implies that he apportions a lot of the blame for this problematic outcome to the work of Nigerian writers and artists. While Soyinka offers a compelling and cautionary response to the war’s queer treatment, I still maintain that Okparanta’s circumlocutory articulation of Biafra represents a bold step forward for creative responses to the conflict. Indeed, the creative and ethical force of *Udala Trees*’ remediation of the crisis stems from the fact that it does not shy away from engaging with its complex and taboo legacies. Soyinka’s critique is certainly an urgent one, but he does something similar to Okparanta in his play *Madmen and Specialists* (1970). As I noted in the first chapter, Soyinka chooses not to name Biafra in the play – which was his first dramatic response to the conflict – despite its overt post-war setting. The fact that the word ‘Biafra’ connotes such emotive and dissenting potency reinforces my view that the crisis’s legacies have represented a queer and mutable topography. Reflecting the imaginative ‘nowhere’ that Ashcroft conceptualises, it is a configuration that contains both generative and occluding potentialities.

Demonstrating how the Biafran war has come to represent irreducible and queer historical ground, Okparanta’s novel resists the idea of creative coherence and interpretive mastery. Indeed, as it is constructed around a fragmented temporal and stylistic core, the narrative of *Udala Trees* is redolent of the rotten and formfooling aesthetic that underpins Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*. The fact that Okparanta’s creatively queer intervention refracts the legacies of the war through feminist as well as lesbian lenses offers yet more evidence of the Biafran war providing artists with highly elastic creative material: material that is ripe for forceful revision and reinvention. It is through the novel’s traversal of overlapping representational registers – spanning the realistic, the oneiric and the phantasmatic – that it distils the deeper ramifications of Akeh’s vision of Biafra as catalysing “love across the

dividing lines” (70). As such, *Udala Trees* and other artworks attest that such a queer vision has been hardwired into creative responses to the crisis.

I further elucidate the queer resonance that runs through artistic responses to Biafra in the conclusion to this thesis. In it, I propose that a sophisticated and speculative hermeneutics of suspicion underpins the critical-creative propensities inscribed within this diverse body of works. By examining the speculative mediations made manifest in three works – Adichie’s *Yellow Sun*, a short story by Lesley Nneka Arimah and a sign painting by Middle Art – I argue that processes of semiotic speculation have been central in promulgating the war’s queering, formfooling and unknowable legacies in the arts.

## 5) Conclusion: Biafran speculations

‘Stop asking me, this child!’ Olanna said. But she saw a good sign in Baby’s question too, although she could not yet decipher its meaning. (Adichie, *HYS* 432)

Taken from the final pages of Adichie’s novel *Yellow Sun*, this epigraph enshrines a question that has haunted the margins of my analysis of Biafra’s artistic legacies. In essence, it asks: are there limits to what the Nigeria-Biafra war can do or become as a cultural signifier and creative resource in Nigeria and beyond? Although the fragment does not engage directly with the problematic of Biafra’s symbolic significance, it nonetheless demonstrates a concern with pondering the creative possibilities of the war and with probing their spectral limits. In rounding off my investigation of Biafran mediations, this conclusion seeks to clarify the thesis’s broader account of the Nigeria-Biafra war’s artistic legacies by proposing that a speculative semiotics is at play in this cultural corpus. Given the formfooling, unknowable and queer dynamics located and analysed in the previous three chapters, this closing section seeks to appraise the fuller implications of Biafra’s “patchy fabric” (Forsyth 70). To further elucidate this formulation, I contend that the speculative impulse I uncover is measured by a simultaneous drive toward opacity, imbuing the fraught legacies of the war with mythic force and fragile futurity.

In order to explicate these speculative representations, the conclusion considers the imaginative limits of the Biafran war by examining works that reframe Biafra’s creative and semiotic potential in speculative terms. Thus, in addition to offering a further reading of Adichie’s novel, I introduce two different works to the thesis that explore such ideas. These are the title story from Lesley Nneka Arimah’s collection *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017) and a painting produced in the 1970s by the sign painter Middle Art. As the previous chapters evidence, the Biafran conflict has represented fertile ground for artistic reinvention, catalysing experiments that fissure and formfool the confines of certain



normative and narrative frames. As a means of summing up and extending these readings, the conclusion considers what happens when such endeavours push the idea of Biafra to the creative limit, using it to imagine speculative futures and alternative realities. What are the creative consequences of such experiments when they encounter the contested histories and forceful memories of the Biafran crisis? Can the period be sufficiently recalibrated or reconciled within the Nigerian cultural imaginary to produce more progressive or liberating political effects?

In *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony* (2014), Eleni Coundouriotis offer analyses of Nigeria-Biafra war literature that help to answer these questions. The critic argues that these narratives demonstrate a “growing engagement with the plight of the ordinary people” (Coundouriotis 151), which contributes to her broader assessment of African war fiction as expressing “a strong sense of obligation to tell a history from below” (32). Yet in a section dedicated to Biafran war writings, Coundouriotis nuances this thesis by asserting that the war fictions of authors such as Chukwuemeka Ike and Buchi Emecheta represent “incomplete projects of a people’s history” (151): incomplete because the “[w]ar is narrated as an experience that sharpens social divides” (151). Notwithstanding these narrative complications, Coundouriotis still asserts that these narratives “attempt to create a kind of social cohesion that could create some democratic pressure in Nigeria” (151). Although Coundouriotis makes only a cautious claim about the generative potential of Biafra here, it is still noteworthy that the critic feels driven to graft her people’s history formulation onto a narrative framework concerned with bolstering ideas of political progress in Nigeria. Indeed, this configuration corresponds with Louisa Egbunike’s analysis – explored in the previous chapter – of the possible futures proposed by Biafran artworks. I do not seek to repudiate these hopeful sentiments in this conclusion. Rather, I intend to further elucidate Coundouriotis’s astute observation that artistic responses to Biafra simultaneously articulate and frustrate progressive visions of the war’s significance.

Probing this tense dynamic, I argue that the works of Adichie, Arimah and Middle Art all strain to express Biafra's complex legacies through speculative semiotic processes. By casting this creative modality as a form of speculative semiotics, I foreground these artists' shared concern with interrogating the meanings and complexities of signs in their representations of Biafra: speculative endeavours that imagine alternative formations of narrative and identity. Furthermore, by drawing from Paul Ricoeur's work on memory and forgetting, I assert that these speculative pieces challenge perceptions of Biafra as a mnemonic trace that can be reconciled within fixed conceptual frames of historical amnesty or futurity. Synthesising studies of opacity and myth proffered by Ricoeur and Édouard Glissant, I finally assert that these pieces engage in obscure but potent processes of mythic mediation.

### **5.1 Seeing signs in *Yellow Sun***

Returning to the epigraphic quotation that frames this conclusion, the "good sign" (HYS 432) that Olanna sees in Baby's question at the end of *Yellow Sun* is tacitly bound up with Biafra's reincorporation into the Nigerian state. This is due, in part, to the sign's linkage with the disappearance of Olanna's twin sister Kainene after she travels to the Nigeria-Biafra border to trade near the end of the war. As the narrative voice reveals, Olanna keeps "seeing signs of Kainene's return" (HYS 432) in the aftermath of Biafra. And yet, as the bitter divisions and grievances that were so critically articulated during the period of hostilities have remained unresolved in the eyes of many Nigerians, the fact that Olanna cannot fully interpret the good omen she perceives at the war's end – "she could not yet decipher its meaning" (HYS 432) – casts doubt on Biafra's symbolic and speculative potential at the very moment that these possibilities are teased out in the text. Indeed, the final scene shows Olanna becoming creatively involved in the reconstruction of Kainene's spectral presence,

engaging in a process of semiotic authorship that can only partially transpose her haunting memories of the war into new forms.

After Olanna sees the good sign in Baby's question, it is revealed that all her perceptions have become inscribed with speculative markers: "Odenigbo told her that she had to stop seeing signs in everything. She was angry that he could disagree with her seeing signs of Kainene's return and then she was grateful that he did [doubt it]" (*HYS* 432). The signs Olanna perceives in her surroundings have the effect of marking Kainene's presence despite her loss. This speculative and semiotic inscription within the imaginative space of the narrative engages in what Ricoeur calls the "permanent spirit of language" ("Myth as the Bearer" 489), which is "*the capacity of language to open up new worlds*" (489, italics in original). However, just as cultural and political tensions have endured in Nigeria since 1970, Olanna's inability to decode the speculative signs she perceives demonstrates the limited power of such acts of semiotic projection. Indeed, this seemingly generative hermeneutic process is ultimately rendered incapable of transforming or erasing legacies of personal and communal strife.

Despite these shortcomings, Olanna's faith in these obscure signs – which she imaginatively projects but crucially cannot decipher – stubbornly endures and is in fact nourished by Odenigbo's doubt: "[I]t meant he did not believe anything had happened that would make his disagreeing inappropriate" (*HYS* 432). Odenigbo's resistance strengthens Olanna's belief that the life they led before the war and prior to Kainene's loss can be refashioned in the future. Olanna's final declaration in the novel reaffirms this sentiment: "[O]ur people say that we all reincarnate, don't they?" she said. '*Uwa m, uwa ozo*. When I come back in my next life, Kainene will be my sister.'" (*HYS* 433, italics in original). At first glance, this conclusive remark reinforces the hope inscribed at the end of *Yellow Sun* that memories of the past can help forge a brighter future. Indeed, the fact that Olanna's emboldened words once again reinvoked the presence of Kainene in the narrative despite her

physical disappearance resonates with John Caputo's argument that "only as 'hauntology' – to employ an impish Derrideanism – is hermeneutics possible" (95). Deepening Jacques Derrida's conception that "learning to live" (xvii) requires one to "learn spirits" (xvii) – an interaction with ghosts which enables a "being-with the other" (xvii) – Caputo suggests that an engagement with spectrality is the fundamental precondition of all interpretation and world-making. While Olanna is profoundly affected by Kainene's loss, the novel ends with her learning to live with her sister's ghost; by so doing she begins to imagine a new world where the haunting other is enshrined in all experience.

The haunting but hopeful hermeneutics engaged in at the close of *Yellow Sun* appear to support Coundouriotis's argument that Nigeria-Biafra war narratives open up the possibility of formulating alternative and more egalitarian futures. And yet, significant in Coundouriotis's analysis is the distinction she draws between *Yellow Sun* and other fictions of the war in relation to their contrasting expressions of 'ordinary' people's stories: "Adichie herself is not really writing a people's history, at all, but rather proposes a domestic novel as a corrective to what she sees as the failed project of people's history" (235–6). Coundouriotis cites Kainene's disappearance as evidence of this failed project, which underscores "[t]he uncertainty of the political landscape at the war's close [and] bring[s] the meaning of 'home' into crisis" (235). Although I agree that *Yellow Sun* cannot be reduced to a people's history formula, the irreconcilability of Kainene's loss at the end of the novel is also bound up with a degree of speculative obscurity that both shrouds and illuminates the conflict's potential significance. In his *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant theorises the generative force of opacity, arguing that "[o]paqueness imposes itself and cannot be justified. Certainly, it allows us to resist the alienating notion of transparency" (155). For Glissant, this notion of opacity as an uncontainable and resistant phenomenon forms part of a cross-cultural poetics specifically situated in Caribbean societies: one with implicitly political and ethical potentialities. As the artist and writer Zach Blas puts it,

“Glissant’s opacity is an ethical mandate to maintain obscurity, to not impose rubrics of categorization and measurement, which always enact a politics of reduction and exclusion” (para. 6). I propose that such a formulation is also highly suggestive of the complex and opaque dynamics undergirding Biafra’s artistic afterlives.

As the Biafran crisis has been creatively reframed over the last five decades, the dense but patchy fabric of narratives and visual representations woven out of its fragile remembrance have resisted attempts to make Biafra transparent or to exorcise its stubborn spectres. For even as artists have emphasised the need for cross-cultural engagement with the conflict’s legacies as a way of overcoming the divided sentiments it crystallised, repeated mediations of the Biafran signifier have also produced increasingly entangled and protean effects. To further theorise this signifying obscurity, I now turn to the more starkly speculative and mythic mediations inscribed within other Biafran war arts.

## 5.2 Queer opacity in “What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky”<sup>63</sup>

Lesley Nneka Arimah’s story represents a striking addition to the corpus of Biafran arts for the way it recasts the conflict and the humanitarian crisis it induced using a speculative narrative framework. Set in the latter half of the twenty-first century, “What It Means” imagines that after a war of Biafran secession in the 2030s – which ends with the state achieving its independence from an unnamed oppressor – rising sea levels resulting from extreme climate change lead to the mass migration of European societies to the African continent (Arimah 155–6). Although Biafra saves the British population from the impending floods, the former colonial power soon turns on its rescuer by “threat[ening] to deploy biological weapons” (Arimah 156) unless an apartheid-style system of social and political separation is instituted within the “Biafra-Britannia Alliance” (155–6). An even more

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<sup>63</sup> I henceforth refer to the story, which was shortlisted for the 2017 Caine Prize for African Writing, as “What It Means”.

destructive event called “The Elimination” (Arimah 165) takes place when the French population moves wholesale to Senegal; a “synthesized virus” (167) is unleashed on the Senegalese population that results in millions of deaths. As humanity teeters on the brink of catastrophe, a Chilean mathematician named Furcal miraculously intervenes, discovering an infinite formula capable of decoding the universe. Although most people see the algorithm as nothing but an “impenetrable series of numbers and symbols” (Arimah 137), its universal applicability enables certain gifted individuals – including Nneoma, the story’s protagonist – to become a new kind of grief worker. As it is revealed, “[s]eeing the Formula unlocked something in [Nneoma]. From then on she could see a person’s sadness as plainly as the clothes he wore” (Arimah 158). Capable of evaluating and extracting the emotional pain of those caught up in the global disaster, these grief workers form part of a broader system – underpinned by Furcal’s formula – designed to stave off humanity’s ruin. Like Olanna in *Yellow Sun*, Nneoma is highly attuned to the signifying potential of her surroundings in the aftermath of Biafra’s secession, albeit one that takes place in a different century from the original breakaway. Yet despite this striking correspondence between the two narratives, speculative signs are not just seen in “What It Means”; they are deciphered and transformed as well.

While Biafra’s secession in 1967 is implicitly referenced in the story, this creative turn to that historical moment is only tangentially elucidated in the text. Indeed, the clearest indication of Biafra’s twentieth-century origins is given when the narrative voice explains Nneoma’s personal connection to the Biafra-Britannia Alliance: “[h]er father was only a boy when it happened but still held bitterly to the idea of Biafran independence, an independence his parents had died for in the late 2030s” (156). Although this passage introduces the idea of Biafran independence, it does not mention the historical or geographical origins of Biafra, and instead constructs the state as an opaque and essentially transnational formation. In this regard, it is also significant that the word ‘Nigeria’ is entirely omitted from the story. The

‘real’ Nigeria-Biafra war was of course highly mediated by an array of geopolitical forces and interests, which spanned economic, military and ideological spheres. Indeed, as Britain was a proactive supporter of Nigeria’s efforts to thwart Biafra’s secession, these historical dynamics are implicitly indexed in the narrative of “What It Means”. And yet, as the story radically recasts Biafra’s relationship with Britain and extirpates Nigeria’s role altogether, so those original transnational connections undergo radical transformations.

On the one hand, these creative decisions reflect Arimah’s temporal and geographical distance from the original event. Although the writer spent much of her childhood in Nigeria – she was born in the United Kingdom in the 1980s – her family moved frequently within the country and internationally, and she has since settled in the United States (Hertzel para. 11). As a diasporic Nigerian writer, Arimah’s reimagining of the Biafran war in a speculative mood is thus inflected with the sorts of pressures and strains that affect many of the artists considered in this thesis: from the exilic trajectories of Wole Soyinka, Olu Oguibe and Obiora Udechukwu to the more self-selecting and familial migrations of Adichie, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Chinelo Okparanta. Although these artists do very different things with the Biafran cultural imaginary – as do those figures, for example Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ogali A. Ogali, who were based in Nigeria more continuously during their lives – they are bound together by a desire to unveil and recast its fissuring forms and transitive significances. Indeed, as with Okparanta’s *Udala Trees*, “What It Means” is also notable for its invocation of homosexual identities. Although Nneoma’s failed relationship with her fellow grief worker Kioni is not marked as transgressive or remarkable in the story, their lesbian relationship nevertheless inscribes a queer dynamic in the text akin to that located in *Udala Trees* in the previous chapter. While Okparanta’s novel stretches the historical facticity and allegorical transmissibility of Biafra to explore socio-religious attitudes in present day Nigeria, Arimah finds even greater elasticity and opacity in Biafra’s queering potential.

In “What It Means”, the history of the original Biafran crisis is obviated from the narrative even as it provides one of the central frames of reference for its speculative work. Although this obscuring of the history of Biafra could be seen to support Glissant’s call for an opacity that resists the alienating effects of transparency, it also runs the risk of promulgating the idea that Biafra has been obliterated from public discourses in Nigeria and around the world. To borrow a phrase coined by Ricoeur, “institutions of forgetting” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 500) have played an important role in shaping perceptions of the conflict since the war. Indeed, this tendency is evidenced by Gowon’s call for the redaction of the word ‘Biafra’ from Nigeria’s public sphere and by the lack of emphasis placed on this historical period in educational syllabi in the country. Such institutions of forgetting, as Ricoeur puts it, “provide grist to the abuses of forgetting, counterparts to the abuses of memory” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 500). Yet Ricoeur also insists that traces of such memories persist despite their effacement, noting that there is also a “forgetting that preserves” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 442): “it is thus possible to learn what in a certain fashion we have never ceased to know” (442). There remains – so Ricoeur suggests – a latent, stubborn form of remembrance that cannot be fully expunged or reconciled by institutions of forgetting: a theorisation that is arguably born out in “What It Means”.

From the beginning of the narrative, the irrefutability of Furcal’s infinite formula is thrown into doubt. As the title indicates, a person who has used it to defy gravity is reported to have unexpectedly fallen to his death, and rumours circulate of grief workers losing their minds. These concerns become clarified towards the end of the story when Nneoma is confronted by a dishevelled and distressed Kioni. In her desperation, Kioni tells Nneoma that “[t]hey just come and they come and they come” (Arimah 173). Realising that Kioni’s words refer to the accumulated memories and traumas she has extracted from thousands of grieving patients, Nneoma begins to make sense of these terrible developments: “What would happen if you couldn’t forget, if every emotion from every person whose grief you’d



eaten came back up? It could happen, if something went wrong with the formula millions and millions of permutations down the line” (Arimah 173). The semiotic and speculative power of Furcal’s algorithm, which promises to eradicate legacies of suffering, is ultimately rendered as finite and flawed. Indeed, the story ends with Nneoma too succumbing to the overwhelming force of these memories. As she attempts to calculate the surge of grief afflicting Kioni, the breadth of it ultimately proves to be “[t]oo vast” (Arimah 174). The final paragraph intimates that Nneoma’s mind has been irreparably damaged by the effort: “The last clear thought she would ever have was of her father [...], and of how very pale it all seemed now” (174). As with the epigraph taken from *Yellow Sun*, the speculative recoding of the Biafran war in “What It Means” unravels and fades away as the sheer multiplicity of Biafra’s entangled significations are rendered unquantifiable and inextinguishable.

The opacity that overwhelms Biafra’s speculative potential at the end of “What It Means” does not only have ramifications for the story’s characters, however. The reader is also implicated in these developments. As the historical record of the Biafran war is omitted from the text, the reader’s experience is surely similar to that of the grief workers’ patients, who appear to have been relieved of the burden of memory. And yet, as the formula designed to reconcile such recollections is revealed to be faulty, so Biafra’s impenetrable and ineluctable cultural force reasserts itself, although only obscurely. By refusing to reduce the conflict to a singular formulation or sign, the text thus reinforces my argument in this conclusion that Biafra’s artistic legacies are underpinned by processes of speculative and opaque transformation. Moreover, by highlighting the measure of signifying opacity that such Biafran mediations precipitate, “What It Means” also uncovers a mythic dimension in these dynamics. Writing on the subject of myth, Glissant argues that it “disguises while conferring meaning, obscures and brings to light, mystifies as well as clarifies and intensifies *that* which emerges [...]. It explores the known-unknown” (71, *italics in original*). Such a

theorisation helps to elucidate the tense interplay between speculation and opacity in the Biafran war narratives of Arimah and Adichie.

Ricoeur's writings on myth help to further clarify the dynamic theorised by Glissant. Asserting that myth represents a crucial but obscure foundation for all social identities and formations, Ricoeur goes on to foreground its transitive potential: "[T]he original potential of any genuine myth will always transcend the confines of a particular community or nation. The *mythos* of any community is the bearer of something which exceeds its own frontiers; it is the bearer of other *possible* worlds" ("Myth as the Bearer" 489, italics in original). The excessive opacity of myth elucidated by Ricoeur is thus prefigured as emergent obscurity by Glissant; these formulations are resonant of the argument I made at the end of the last chapter, namely that a utopian impulse underpins Biafra's queering legacies, which drives artists to explore the elsewheres made possible by its thorny and entangled significances.

In relation to the writings of Adichie and Arimah explored in this conclusion, the Nigeria-Biafra war is arguably expressed as a mythic formation in these texts, one that represents an obscure but mutable focal point for debates about postcolonial Nigeria. Indeed, it is arguable that the mythic potency of the Biafran crisis – which is driven by the utopian and destructive impulses enshrined in its ambivalent remembrance – has been forged in large part due to its creative remediation by artists. Adichie, Arimah and others besides have rendered the Biafra imaginary as constantly exceeding its socio-political and geographical origins, enacting processes of mythic mediation that have enabled them to recast the very frames that work to delimit understanding of its histories and memories. And yet, the mythic potential of Biafra's speculative opacity is not only expressed in the work of writers. As I now illustrate, it is also figured in the creations of visual artists.

### 5.3 Mythic mediations in Middle Art's *One Nigeria*

A painting by the sign writer Middle Art (the professional name of Augustine Okoye) offer a striking counterpoint to the literary mediations of Biafra produced by Adichie and Arimah in the twenty-first century. Born in eastern Nigeria in 1936 (Middle Art 10), Middle Art composed numerous works in response to the war during the early 1970s. More significantly, his artistic practice developed outside of the structures of higher education institutions that have influenced the world views and styles of many of the artists explored in this thesis. These contextual details lend his artistic creations a distinctive cultural resonance. Middle Art started out as an apprentice sign writer in Onitsha, a town on the shores of the Niger river that is best known for its thriving pamphleteering culture, and there he made a living by painting commercial advertisements (Middle Art 12). As a jobbing artist who worked in a variety of media, he chose the pseudonym 'Middle Art' to present himself as a moderate and humble artisan rather than as a self-aggrandising or arrogant one (Middle Art 12). As he puts it: "And no good for a person to [*sic*] exalting himself" (Middle Art 12). In terms of Middle Art's experience of the Nigeria-Biafra war, he fled Onitsha when it came under attack from Nigerian forces in 1967, and worked variously as an angler, a barber and a weaver as he moved through the embattled enclave (Middle Art 12–3). He was eventually conscripted into the Biafran army, and went on to serve at the Uli airfield – where the majority of humanitarian aid supplies were flown to – working both as a runway marshal and as an anti-aircraft gunner until the end of the war (Middle Art 13).

Middle Art returned to Onitsha after Biafra's capitulation in 1970, and he was soon contacted by the influential German educator and patron Ulli Beier, who invited him to take up a residency at the University of Ile-Ife in western Nigeria (Middle Art 14). Once the artist arrived at Ile-Ife, he produced a series of paintings – at the behest of Beier – that responded his experiences of the war (Beier 21). While Middle Art's relationship with Beier demonstrates that he was not entirely cut off from Nigeria's more elite artistic networks, he

would never achieve the kind of fame enjoyed by other artists patronised by the German. Beier offers one explanation for Middle Art's relative obscurity in an essay exploring his art. The patron asserts: "[T]hough capable of considerable technical skill, Middle Art does not always exercise it. It is unfortunate that he only occasionally rises above the level of technical competence" (Beier 21). Implicit in Beier's condescending critique is the sense that Middle Art's 'popular' style of art is less accomplished than that of his more established contemporaries. Although Beier is much more approving of Middle Art's post-war creations, it is crucial to keep in mind Karin Barber's assertion that "[n]o one should assume that 'popular' [works] are somehow easier, more available and less demanding than the productions of the 'educated elite'" (8). While Beier appears to reinforce this negative stereotype, I argue that Middle Art's responses to the war express what Barber defines as "the striking ambiguity of many of these [popular works]: their metaphorical, allusive profusion, their evasiveness and evanescence, their resistance to interpretation as they demand that they be interpreted" (8).

Of the paintings Middle Art produced at Ile-Ife in the months following Biafra's surrender in January 1970, I want to highlight one work – titled *One Nigeria* (see Figure 21) – which anticipates the speculative and mythic semiotics located in Adichie's and Arimah's narratives using a vibrant visual style.

Fig. 21. Middle Art, *One Nigeria*, ca. 1970, oil on hardboard. H x W: 61.5 x 91 cm.  
Figure reproduced in Volume II of the thesis.

In the painting, Middle Art produces a phantasmatic vision of the war's end and of Nigeria's subsequent reunification. Swathes of incandescent colour cover the hardboard, while bright, jagged lines are used to express the bitter divisions and gaping wounds instantiated by the crisis. Indeed, the two flags situated in the bottom corners of the painting, which proclaim the restoration of peace and unity in the Nigerian polity, appear rather flimsy; they are also overshadowed by the dark lesion in the centre of the image that threatens to consume the whole work. The painting's infernal portrayal of Nigeria's post-war reunification is further complicated by the graphic icons that dominate the upper corners of the hardboard. On the left side, Biafra's erstwhile leader Chukwuemeka Ojukwu flees the scene in a surreal aircraft, leaving a spectral imprint in his wake; to the right, Nigeria's pre-war regional structure is figured as three cardinal points, with the words "A WORD SAID TO EAST IS A TASK MUST BE DONE" acting as an explicatory but ambiguous subtitle to the amputated Eastern cardinal. Through a playful subversion of the Federalist slogan "To Keep Nigeria One Is A Task That Must Be Done" (St. Jorre 137), Middle Art imagines that a message – currently

unknown and potentially unknowable – needs to be communicated to the former Biafrans. The inclusion of these details, which resonate with the aesthetic-ethics of unknowability located in the arts of the Nsukka group in the second chapter, lends the painting a biting satirical edge. This sense is reinforced by the text that surrounds the dismembered hand positioned near the centre of the canvas. Although it is portrayed as “THE HAND THAT JOINED THE CARDINAL BACK AGAIN (HEAD OF STATES)”, such a conciliatory sentiment is ironically undercut by the addition of the word “LUCK”, which hovers at the end of the white arrow that points to the centre of the supposedly authoritative and unifying hand. This synthesis of pictorial and textual iconography enables Middle Art to offer a nuanced meta-commentary on the events portrayed in *One Nigeria*; it also reinforces the argument I made in the first chapter of this thesis about the reflexive and recursive impulses driving the Biafran war arts.

Although Middle Art painted *One Nigeria* soon after Biafra’s defeat, the heady effects he produces through the splicing together of variously non-realistic and abstract icons, of textual fragments and apocalyptic imagery, are surely redolent of the obscured speculations offered several decades later by Adichie and Arimah. *One Nigeria* shows Middle Art rendering the signifying and mythic force of Biafra’s aftermath in both clarified and excessive terms. Drawing on his training as a sign writer – someone charged with expressing distilled but potent visions of businesses and commercial products – Middle Art’s practice lends itself to focalising the brutal intensities and deep complexities of the war. As the disproportionate effects of the conflict were felt not only physically and psychologically but also discursively and iconographically, Middle Art inculcates these various excesses with acuity in *One Nigeria*. As such, the painting powerfully conveys the “allusive profusion” (Barber 8) and “resistance to interpretation” (8) so central to popular art forms in Africa. In doing so, it also captures the mythic murkiness that has inveigled conceptions of the war since the late 1960s. As the

journalist John de St. Jorre puts it, from a very early point a “choking fog of myth and propaganda [...] obscured the conflict” (17).

While Middle Art vividly conveys the impenetrability of the Biafran mythology in *One Nigeria*, he also creatively refigures it. As Glissant and Ricoeur encourage readings of the generative as well as obscuring capacities of mythologies, so the possibility of Nigeria’s post-war reunification is rendered as a subversive expression of speculative signification by Middle Art. As debates about the unresolved legacies of Biafra have raged in Nigeria in the last five decades, it is noteworthy that Middle Art is able to capture the insolubility of these issues with such imaginative force in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. Indeed, when *One Nigeria* is viewed alongside the Biafran mediations of Adichie and Arimah, it becomes clear that all three artworks enshrine the belief that while the legacies of Biafra cannot be fully calculated or resolved, the war’s residual effects are nevertheless a vital source of creativity, opacity and remembrance. Ricoeur theorises this complex dynamic in his account of “the primary equivocalness of destructive forgetting and of founding forgetting” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 443). Noting that these processes are “fundamentally undecidable” (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 443), Ricoeur adds that “[i]n human experience, there is no superior point of view from which one could apprehend the common source of destroying and constructing. In this great dramaturgy of being, for us, there is no final assessment” (443). This view is surely reinforced by the speculative mediations of Adichie, Arimah and Middle Art, as well as in the variously formfooling, multimedia, unknowable and queering arts explored in the previous sections of the thesis. Although produced in different contexts and through different means, they all articulate and feel for the deep undecidability of Biafra’s disputed but enduring significance.

#### 5.4 Coda: Biafra's reckoning and renewal

As I have argued throughout this thesis, artistic mediations of the history and memory of Biafra have catalysed multiple processes of aesthetic innovation. Through these operations, a range of narrative, political and ethical frames have been recursively fissured in order to generate new formations and perspectives. Yet it is crucial to underscore that the contentious nature of the Nigeria-Biafra war has neither been resolved nor expunged through these creative activities. Indeed, while Biafra is not a salient concern for many Nigerians living today, its affective and divisive potencies continue to leave their mark on the country. In *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (2010), Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto sum up the vital and troubling legacies of the war for ideas of collective memory and history in Nigeria:

Competing histories, varying visions of national identity and ethnicity, and traumatic memories of war have all been crucial factors in the multiple uses of the past to shape contemporary politics, to justify violence and conflict, and to interpret the nature of intergroup relations. [...] Daily political realities are chaotic, and the presentation of histories reveals ambiguities, disharmony, and conflicts. (260)

I would add to this formulation that there are also speculative, opaque and mythic significances that have affected Biafra's divisive legacies: potent dynamics which artists have been central in interrogating and propagating since the late 1960s. These creative endeavours have not necessarily been clarifying or reconciliatory, nor have they succeeded in reframing the war as a productive or democratising historical formation.

Representing a vibrant but entangled cultural signifier in and of postcolonial Nigeria, Biafra has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for adaptation, even as the divisions and prejudices articulated by the crisis have become increasingly entrenched. Although artists gesture towards myriad elsewheres through their Biafran mediations, these transformations also run the risk of dissolving Biafra's resistant potential even as they redefine its aesthetic limits. Yet it is precisely through the articulation of such dangers that the war's creative and ethical vitality has been enshrined. Given these powerful legacies, it is surely arguable that the Biafran war ranks as one of the critical events of the twentieth century. I borrow the



anthropologist Veena Das's formulation of 'critical events': a phrase which she uses to describe periods in history that produce "various transformations" (5) and propel people's lives "into new and unpredicted terrains" (5). Das's conceptualisation also resonates with Ricoeur's theorisation of historical calamities like the Holocaust. These events, so Ricoeur contends, are "situated at the limits of representation" (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 498) because they "protest that they were and as such they demand being said, recounted, understood. This protestation, which nourishes attestation, is part of belief: it can be contested but not refuted" (498). The mediations of the Nigeria-Biafra war explored in this thesis are all defined by such transformative and irrefutable significances. They offer forceful protestations and attestations in response to Biafra that I have sought to illuminate through my analysis. Indeed, I have striven to demonstrate the necessity of reframing critical approaches to Biafra as a means of uncovering the entangled but vibrant legacies of this and other violent struggles.

Looking forward, this thesis offers a way of thinking more comparatively and creatively about the complex cultural afterlives of civil conflicts and political crises in Africa since decolonisation. Although such distinctive and destructive events have acted as flash points for the stark socio-economic inequalities and ethno-political fissures inherited from the colonial period, they have also provoked artists to produce a rich array of creative responses that, in turn, work to reframe and challenge understanding of postcolonial African states. As I have argued that meaning and form are always open to reinvention when it comes to Biafra's artistic legacies, such signifying precarity – wherever it may be found – is rich with possibilities. It is at the febrile and mediated intersection between representation, memory and myth that Biafra's radical but fractured potency is reckoned with as well as renewed.

## 6) Bibliography

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