

# WHO SPEAKS? WHO LISTENS?: THE PROBLEM OF ADDRESS IN TWO NIGERIAN TRAUMA NOVELS

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Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.

Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud refers to this moment in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* as an example of the unconscious repetition of trauma. Tancred's unknowing killing of his beloved not just once, but twice, illustrates for Freud a passive compulsion to repeat that makes up part of the dynamics of trauma (16). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth expands upon Freud's reading of this moment by drawing attention "to a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (2-3). Doing so, she reads this scene as an illustration of the latency of trauma and the ethical address delivered through this belated knowing: "The figure of Tancred addressed by the speaking wound constitutes, in other words, not only a parable of trauma and of its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness" (9).

Freud's and Caruth's readings of this tale illustrate the difficulty of using trauma theory to read the experience of the colonized Other. One dilemma with

these readings is that they rewrite one woman's bodily experience of trauma as the trauma of the male consciousness. In Caruth's analysis, Tancred is both the traumatized subject and the witness to an enigmatic otherness. Although Caruth's formulation draws attention to and attempts to listen to the voice of the Other, it is Tancred who remains "psychoanalytic theory itself." But Tancred does not experience the trauma; Clorinda does.<sup>1</sup> And the voice that cries out from the wound is not a universal voice, nor is it a generic female voice: it is the female voice of black Africa.

This episode in *Jerusalem Delivered* tells of the death of the woman warrior Clorinda who fights against the Christian crusaders led by Tancred. She is the white daughter of the black Christian King and Queen of Ethiopia. Because of Clorinda's color and fear of the King's reprisal, the Queen gives Clorinda away at birth to a pagan Eunuch to raise. Only at the moment of her first death does Clorinda ask for a Christian baptism. Thus, already in Tasso's story, Clorinda has been whitened and Christianized to make her an acceptable lover for his hero. In this act, we witness an early European discursive encounter with a racial and religious Other, a representation that is repeated in Freud's and Caruth's readings of Tancred not as the perpetrator of trauma but as the victim of it.

I draw attention to this textual encounter in the foundational works of early and contemporary trauma theory because it stages the traumatic relationship between the Western knowing consciousness and the silent, unknowable African Other and demonstrates the difficulty of representing that Other within such theories. In putting together this collection on postcolonial trauma novels, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens ask a number of questions, among them, how trauma studies can redeem its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement and whether postcolonial trauma narratives present challenges to trauma theory. If the story of Tancred is the scene of psychoanalytic writing, it reveals, I argue, that the discourse of trauma is founded upon an erasure of the voice of the Colonial Other. Caruth identifies trauma as an ethical discourse of the Other because it "opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*" ("Introduction" 10). However, this formulation erects a structural barrier to such an understanding in so much as it positions the Other in the place of "impossibility" while situating the addressee in the illuminated space of knowledge and the possible. Clorinda, already Westernized, now becomes an aporetic voice that cries out but remains unsigned. What are the implications of this privileging when one attempts to theorize the trauma of colonialism? How might postcolonial trauma narratives open up this scene of psychoanalytic writing and envision alternative methods of address?

To consider how trauma theory might move beyond this colonial binary, I will discuss moments of encounter between Africa and the West in two contemporary Nigerian novels: Christopher Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), which

takes place primarily in Lagos in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), which deals with the civil war in Nigeria in the late 1960s. Both writers are part of what has become known as the third generation of Nigerian writers.<sup>2</sup> Sharing an attention to detailed realism combined with narrative techniques drawn from Nigerian storytelling and cultural practices, these works seek to create a voice that is not reliant upon a Western subject for testimony but instead disputes the objectivity and knowledge of such an addressee. I begin my analysis by examining each novel's depiction of the trauma of colonialism and neocolonialism and the problem of voice before turning to a close reading of the ways in which the narratives of these novels work through this structural problem in order to bring forward an African subject who challenges the authority of the addressee. To conclude, I return to the question of Clorinda's position by inquiring into the status of female African voices in these novels, the continued absence of which raises questions about the ability of Western trauma theory to account for the particularities of colonialism and gender.

### **Trauma and Neocolonialism**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* tells a story of the Nigerian Civil War from the point of view of characters living in Biafra. The novel's third-person narration follows closely three characters: Olanna, a teacher before the war at Nsukka University; Ugwu, her husband's houseboy; and Richard, the British lover of Olanna's twin sister. The novel belongs to the genre of contemporary trauma fiction because of its focus on the massacre of the Igbo, the ensuing civil war, and the death and starvation of a million or more Nigerians and because of its exploration of the difficulty of recounting and voicing that trauma. The novel does not concentrate on those at the center of the conflict—soldiers fighting in battle—but on the effect of traumatic events on the daily domestic lives of civilians. As the novel progresses, each of its three main characters undergoes, along with daily fear and hunger, a traumatic encounter: Olanna witnesses the murder of Igbos in the streets of Kano, including some of her family; Richard sees the murder of Igbos in the airport while waiting for a plane; and Ugwu is conscripted into the army where he observes and perpetrates the violence of wartime. As a result, each of these characters shows classic traumatic symptoms of disassociation and withdrawal, including the inability to locate the words to recount their experience. Olanna finds that “[she] wanted to ask him to stop being ridiculous, but her lips were heavy. Speaking was a labor. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen” (157). Olanna exhibits classic characteristics of the traumatized in her struggle and inability to discuss the past. Similarly, Richard tries to write about his experience, “but he stopped because the sentences were risible. They were too melodramatic. They sounded just like the articles in the foreign press, as if these killings had not happened and, even if they had, as if

they had not quite happened that way. The echo of unreality weighed each word down” (168). And toward the end of the novel, Ugwu, after he is wounded and returns from his service in the army, also seeks solace in language:

Ugwu thanked him and shook his head and realized that he would never be able to capture that child on paper, never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky. He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed. (398)

With each of these cases, the novel initiates a discussion about how we record and speak about trauma.

Adichie’s novel situates the war and the preceding massacre in relationship to an additional site of trauma: the lingering effects of colonialism. Despite independence from Britain in October 1960, individual and national identity in Nigeria remain scarred by the inheritance of colonialism and oppression. In 1966, Igbo military officers led a coup, which was followed by a reprisal against the Igbo. The massacre of the Igbo led to the secession of southeast Nigeria, the establishment of the Biafran republic, and the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War. *Half of a Yellow Sun* makes explicit the link between colonialism and the ethnic and political strife of the new nation: “If this is hatred, then it is very young. It has been caused, simply, by the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity would not exist” (166-67). Telling the story of the Biafran republic and the Nigerian Civil War, *Half of a Yellow Sun* challenges the concept of the “postcolonial” by connecting the violence in post-Independence Nigeria with the centuries of colonial rule. The economic, political, and cultural domination of colonialism lingers in multiple ways long after the changing of flags.<sup>3</sup>

The traumatic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in the large-scale events of history but also in the daily private lives of citizens. In Abani’s *GraceLand*, the hegemonic inheritance of colonial culture is seen in the identities and values adopted by characters surrounded by the artifacts of Western culture in contemporary Lagos. The protagonist, named Elvis because of his mother’s love for the US singer, works at the beginning of the story as an Elvis impersonator, dressing up in white face and dancing for local tourists. US music and movies frame the lives of Elvis and his friends and colonize their imaginations. Watching a battle between John Wayne and a villain known only as Actor, Elvis contemplates how “[t]hese films showed another aspect of that eternal war Father Macgettrick told them was being fought daily between the fallen angels led by Lucifer and the army of Christ, commanded by the armor-wearing, sword-wielding Archangel Michael. And just as in that story, the hordes of demons were dark-skinned” (149). This passage reveals the

division of the colonial world into what Frantz Fanon calls a Manichean order: “The colonial world is a Manichaeian world. The colonist is not content with physically limiting the space of the colonized, i.e., with the help of his agents of law and order. As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil” (*Wretched* 6). There is an “eternal war” being played out on the landscape of Africa, and Elvis and his friends are reminded in numerous ways on which side they are positioned. This cultural imperialism is subsequently aligned in the novel with other neocolonial enterprises: the US drug trade, the US black market for body parts, and the World Bank.

Both Abani’s and Adichie’s novels critique the post in postcolonialism when it ignores the way that trauma lingers and repeats itself in the present. In these novels there is no end to colonialism, only a transformation of US and European policies and methods. Conquest and slavery are replaced by the creation of a market that relies heavily on the import of European and US products and by the fueling of tensions between classes and ethnic groups in the name of this continued trade. Nigerian economist Bade Onimode argues,

Since flag independence in 1960, the subsidiaries of giant multinational corporations (MNCs) have emerged as the powerful catalysts of multilateral imperialism in Nigeria. They are the Trojan horses whose monopoly capital and advanced technology, backed by enormous political pressure from their home governments, constitute the dominant mechanism for integrating this and other Third World countries more closely, and more pervasively, into the international system of capitalist domination. (137)

Such an economic diagnosis demands a new investigation of the continued systems of exploitation between Africa and the West. Contemporary Nigeria is crisscrossed by both the return and the continuation of its colonial past. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud theorizes a similar traumatic reoccurrence of history. Due to what he calls “latency,” a history unmarked at the time reappears days, decades, or centuries later (105-07). The creation of Biafra in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a consequence of this unmarked history. The tensions and rivalries fueled by British governance remain unreconciled until they erupt in violence, tearing apart the nation fabricated by the British. Caruth argues that latency is not so much concerned with the return of trauma as a departure from the knowledge and awareness of trauma: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (*Unclaimed* 18). But to whom is the trauma of colonialism inaccessible? Not to the people of Nigeria who live it. Within Nigeria, the violence of the past and present are not outside knowledge but woven into cultural practices and everyday routines. The history of colonialism as trauma perpetrated by the West remains unacknowledged in

the official histories of the Anglo-European civilizing mission and narratives of charity and progress.

In *GraceLand*, we see how the catastrophe of colonialism continues to assert and reassert a material legacy as Elvis struggles to construct an identity and life in the face of lost traditions and political repression. The novel opens with a line describing the kola nut ritual: “This is the kola nut. This seed is a star. This star is life. This star is us.” This opening line starts the recounting of this ceremony, the description of which continues throughout the novel at the start of each chapter. Masculine identity is grounded in this rite that records the relationships between people that define an individual and that outlines a community’s history. The account of the kola nut ritual is juxtaposed against the first lines of the ensuing chapter in which we meet Elvis: “Elvis stood by the open window. Outside: heavy rain. He jammed the wooden shutter open with an old radio battery, against the wind. The storm drowned the tinny sound of the portable radio on the table. He felt claustrophobic, fingers gripping the iron of the rusty metal protector” (3). The novel’s introduction of the protagonist shows him isolated and alone, seeking escape. This initial image embodies the struggles Elvis faces throughout the book as he seeks to rise above the poverty and oppression around him. His sense of alienation is quickly demonstrated in his ritual of dressing as an Elvis impersonator: “With a defeated sigh, he turned to the small tin of talcum powder stuck in one of the pockets of his bag. He shook out a handful and applied a thick layer, peering into the mirror. He was dissatisfied; this was not how white people looked” (11). His attempts to transform himself into a white Elvis and to dance for tips in the hot sun result only in stares and insults at the hotel beach where the British and American tourists stay. This attempt to adopt an alternative identity is only the first of many as he finds himself cut adrift from his past and alienated from his father after the death of his mother.

Masculine identity and the process of becoming a man amidst the trauma of neocolonialism in Nigeria are the focus of Abani’s story. Elvis’s estrangement is reflected in the culture and community around him. The novel’s back-and-forth movement between Elvis as a young adult in urban Lagos and his childhood in the small town of Afikpo grounds the dislocation of the present in the loss of the past brought on by colonialism. From the failed attempt to effectively impersonate a white American celebrity, the novel moves backwards in time, and we are first introduced to Elvis as a child in 1972 at age five: “Elvis had no idea why his father had summoned him to the backyard, away from the toy fire engine he was playing with. He had no idea why he had been asked to strip down to his underwear, or why Uncle Joseph first strapped a grass skirt on him and then began to paint strange designs in red and white dye all over his body” (17). This first initiation rite into manhood is without meaning for Elvis. The ritual is so compromised and cut away from its larger context that Elvis lacks any understanding of what transpires. Instead of hunting and killing

his first eagle as tradition dictates, Elvis is given “a small homemade bow with an arrow strung in it. On the end of the arrow, pierced through its side was a chick. It was still alive and it chirped sadly” (19). The erasure of traditional culture by colonialism is followed by the inroads of Western culture in post-Independence/neocolonial Nigeria. Across Nigerian culture, fragments of old ways exist, but they are shorn of their meaning. Psychological and cultural trauma are evident everywhere, the consequence, Fanon argues, of “[t]he violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country’s economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress” (*Wretched* 5-6). Struggling amidst the dislocation of neocolonial life, Elvis flounders in constructing his identity and in finding a path for his future.

While the designation of colonialism/neocolonialism as a traumatic event may seem plain, much of trauma theory would preclude this designation. To think of neocolonialism as trauma is to force a rethinking of the definition of trauma commonly understood as a single, isolated event “outside the range of human experience” (American Psychiatric Association 250). The failure of this definition, feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown argues, is that “[w]ar and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean” (101); but the daily threat of private violence and constant exposure to traumatic situations that women and oppressed peoples face are not (107). Brown’s disagreement centers around two points: first, that traumatic events have usually been those that involve the dominant group, namely white, heterosexual men; and second, that traumatic events are singular events, not ongoing. What she argues for, though, is a consideration of ongoing, repetitive exposure to trauma. The daily breakdown of protective psychological barriers and the structures of community in contemporary Nigeria result in clear traumatic symptoms that are not an exception to human experience but which make up human experience.

Brown’s insights intersect with those of Fanon’s from almost half a century earlier when he discussed the creation of psychopathology in the colonized subject: “The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about ‘our ancestors, the Gauls,’ identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth. There is identification—that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude” (*Black Skin* 147). Novels, films, textbooks, and comic books, Fanon argues, all confirm a white subjectivity. By identifying with these narratives and images, the colonized subject undergoes a wounding; and this injury, as seen in Elvis, results in a loss of voice and no sense of identity—or rather, an identity modeled after the colonizer, which is no identity at all. Fanon adds, “if there is a traumatism it occurs during those years. The young Antillean is a Frenchman called on at all times to live with white compatriots” (148). For

Fanon, the trauma of colonialism is not limited to single acts of conquest or events of an earlier century but instead is an ongoing daily experience in the everyday lives of people living in neocolonial spaces. As such, exploring the intersection between trauma discourse and neocolonial experience asks for a reconsideration of the traumatic event not as exceptional but as frequent and widespread. Doing so, I believe, will not result in what Dominick LaCapra calls the “indiscriminate conflation of all history with trauma” (76) but instead will encourage a study of the ways that imperialism and colonialism continue, a history invisible to many in the nations from which they spring.

### **Traumatic Articulations**

For the colonized subject, objectivity is always directed against him.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Both *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are concerned with how contemporary history is created and recorded and with who records it. Each novel actively questions the objective authority of the Western observer to know Nigeria. Anne Whitehead argues that “Trauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten” (82). A central preoccupation of trauma fiction is with how to represent a past that resists signification within the current symbolic order. Both Adichie’s and Abani’s novels examine the possibilities and limitations of realism in order to give meaning to that which is antithetical to meaning as it is organized at a specific moment of time. Michael Rothberg argues that one way in which trauma narratives detail a past denied or repressed is through what he calls “traumatic realism—a realism in which the scars that mark the relationship of discourse to the real are not fetishistically denied, but exposed, a realism in which the claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual” (106). Such a form of realism strives to represent accurately the unknowable traumatic past while also maintaining an awareness of the ideological constructedness of realism. As such, Rothberg claims, “traumatic realism is an attempt to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture” (103). Rothberg’s claim coincides with Abdul R. JanMohamed’s thesis that the use of realism in the African novel is a reaction to the false and negative representations of Africa and its culture in the texts of colonialism (8). Rothberg’s formulation can help us to understand how these novels rework the relationship between speaker and addressee in traumatic address. Adichie and Abani represent the details of trauma in Nigeria alongside a critique of the representation and construction of Africa in the Western imagination. Probing and reworking the position of knowing subject



and epistemological object, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *GraceLand* challenge the Manichean organization of the colonial world by uprooting the symbolic order that structures the Western subject's sense of the real.

The focus in each novel on the continued hegemony of a colonial signifying system foregrounds the difficulties these characters face in attaining a voice with which to begin addressing the Western subject. In this way, both texts return us to the question of Clorinda by exploring how to narrate trauma in such a way that it can be heard. The politics of traumatic address are engaged in the responses of the Western media to the Civil War:

“Ancient tribal hatreds,” the *Herald* wrote, was the reason for the massacres. *Time* magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken *whack* literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on the passenger lorries. Richard sent a terse letter off to *Time*. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, *whack* meant *eat*. (Adichie 166)

The British and US journalists situate themselves as witnesses to the trauma of the war, but the story they hear is distorted and filtered through colonial discourses that prevent them from listening. In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub identify the reader or listener as a “secondary witness,” one who Laub claims “is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). But as the Western media in Adichie's novel illustrates, the listener is never simply “a blank screen.” The therapist, the listener, and the reader bring to the speech act of testimony cultural narratives that shape their interpretation and response. The British and American journalists see the events of the Civil War through a set of prejudiced assumptions about the violent and primal nature of Africa.

To this day, Africa remains an abstraction in the West, locked behind imperialist essentialism and generalized, racist images. Rarely in the Western media do fully realized African characters dealing with daily life emerge. In the novel, when Richard responds to these articles with a critique of the colonialism that contributed to the Civil War, he is told that

[t]he international press was simply saturated with stories of violence from Africa, and this one was particularly bland and pedantic, the deputy editor wrote, but perhaps Richard could do a piece on the human angle? Did they mutter any tribal incantations while they did the killings, for example? Did they eat body parts like they did in the Congo? Was there a way of trying truly to understand the minds of these people? (167)

This response makes evident that the images of *Heart of Darkness*, though written over a century ago, linger to this day in the Western cultural unconscious.

Africa continues to signify as one of the few remaining “blank spaces on the earth” (Conrad 22): an indistinguishable, violent, disease-ridden, uncivilized, and unknowable presence in the Western imagination. In this Western narrative, Africa is trauma—a stereotype repeated again in 2006 in the popular and critically acclaimed US films *Last King of Scotland* and *Blood Diamond*.

In the relationship between Richard and Ugwu, *Half of a Yellow Sun* opens up and examines the binary between a knowing Western Subject and an impossible traumatic Otherness. Richard, laughingly called “a modern-day explorer of the Dark Continent” by his Nigerian lover Kainene, comes to Nigeria because of “the magnificent roped pot” (62) he once read about in a publication titled *Colonies Magazine*. As the novel begins, Richard has arrived in Nigeria to chronicle the history and culture of a people who could make such a wonderful pot. He attempts to shed his European identity and become Nigerian, yet in his encounters with the people of Africa, his language and address maintain a colonial privilege. Richard remains a colonial observer, and Kainene challenges his use of the pronoun “we” when he titles his latest attempt at a book: “The World Was Silent When We Died.” It is in this relationship with Kainene that Richard’s continued assumption of privilege is most visible. For him, Kainene is a manifestation of the beautiful pot that drew him to Africa: “I fell in love with Igbo-Ukwu art and then fell in love with her” (310). Despite his effort to shed his European identity, Richard functions as a marker for how colonial epistemology constructs and shapes Africa as an object for consumption. His presence illustrates the continuing legacy and belief of superiority in the Western subject’s relationship with African people. And in Richard’s final appearance in the novel, the barely suppressed racist attitude towards Kainene’s friend Major Madu comes to the surface: “Come back, he wanted to say, come back here and tell me if you ever laid your filthy black hand on her” (429-30).

However, as the novel progresses, the narration of the traumatic history of colonialism and Biafra transfers from Richard to Ugwu. Perpetrating and witnessing the horrors of war, Ugwu is inspired by a passage in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: “Even if it cost me my life, I was determined to read. Keep the black man away from the books, keep us ignorant, and we would always be his slaves” (360). Ugwu becomes the chronicler of trauma as the colonial voice that Richard represents fades into the background, marking the exit of the Western subject from narrative control. The story Ugwu writes disrupts the more conventional narrative flow of the novel as a whole, punctuating it with eight fragments that are different in style and tone from the rest of the text. The book these fragments come from is titled “The World Was Silent When We Died” as Richard bequeaths his title to Ugwu in the final pages of the novel. The witness/addressee relationship is foregrounded in the sixth fragment: “He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died. He argues that Britain inspired this silence. The arms and advice that

Britain gave Nigeria shaped other countries. In the United States, Biafra was ‘under Britain’s sphere of interest.’ In Canada, the prime minister quipped, ‘Where is Biafra?’” (258). Unlike trauma theory’s formulation, the position of impossibility is not the Other’s. The difficulty of communicating lies in the addressee, who cannot hear. These ideas are further developed in the seventh fragment, taken from the epilogue. The title of the poem addresses the reader: “Were you silent when we died?” Here the title of Ugwu’s book is transformed into a question asked by the dead. The addressee imagined is clearly a Western reader, particularly an Anglo-American reader:

Did you see photos in sixty-eight  
Of children with their hair becoming rust . . .  
You needn’t imagine. There were photos  
Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your *Life*.

The poem indicts the Western gaze and the images that became equated in Western culture with Africa. Here the reality of “children with arms like toothpicks, / With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin” (375) are aestheticized and commodified into glossy career-making photographs in US magazines.

Ugwu’s poem implies that the addressee must move beyond an empathic response that relies on identification with the victim. This “secondary trauma” that Felman and Laub extensively theorize is critiqued in Ugwu’s poem: “Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly, / Then turn round to hold your lover or wife?” (375). LaCapra counters Felman’s and Laub’s theories of the relationship between addressee and trauma survivor with the more nuanced concept of “empathic unsettlement”:

It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. (78)

In tying empathy with unsettlement, LaCapra seeks to forestall the sentimental connection that empathy creates. Rather than see one’s emotions mirrored by the other, the academic, historian, or reader should feel unsettled by a relationship that threatens or challenges the boundaries of subjectivity. Yet, empathy in cultural discourses around traumatic events too often slides into just such sentimental identification. In an interview with Caruth and Thomas Keenan, Douglas Crimp critiques this emphasis on empathy: “is empathy anything we would even want to strive for? Because it seems that empathy only gets constructed in relation to sameness, it can’t get constructed in relation

to difference” (263). The call for an empathy grounded upon identification masquerades as acceptance and tolerance, but in actuality, it prohibits a consideration of those with whom we share no visible common ground or whom we do not recognize as like “us.” The introduction of these fragments into the narrative economy of Adichie’s novel and the shift of speaker from Richard to Ugwu represents a significant disruption of the Western addressee’s interpretive privilege. The novel does not allow for the trauma of the war to remain a site of impossibility at the same time that it does not ignore the constructedness of reality, the way in which meaning is imposed upon the real.

Abani’s *GraceLand* picks up this theme of the relationship of Western observer to African trauma. Without his father or traditional culture to provide a guide to manhood, Elvis seeks out other mentors. One, his friend Redemption, leads him down the path of criminality with promises of big money. In one of the novel’s most horrific moments, Elvis finds himself unknowingly escorting black-market body parts and prisoners across Western Africa. As the truck stops for the drivers to stretch their legs, Elvis and his friend Redemption decide to help themselves to a beer in one of the three coolers placed in the back along with the sedated and hand-cuffed people they are guarding. When Elvis opens one of the coolers, he finds instead “six human heads sitting on a pile of ice.” In horror he turns to the other coolers, “[t]he second one held what appeared to be several organs, hearts and livers, also packed with ice. The third held bottles of beer and what looked like food” (237). The description of this awful moment combines the horrific with the banal: human heads and organs alongside beer and food. This contrast reappears throughout Abani’s novel, as when Elvis, escaping from this scene in a stolen car, “sighed, unwrapped a Bazooka, and read the fortune on the insert, desperately seeking words of wisdom” (240).

This moment in the novel illustrates the traumatic interpenetration of cultures in an unevenly globalized world. We see that neocolonialism in Nigeria functions on many levels: cultural, illegal, and corporate. When Elvis demands an explanation from Redemption for how they got involved in this enterprise, he is told, “American hospitals do plenty organ transplant. But dey are not always finding de parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so dey can save their children or demselves” (242). Africans themselves become the latest natural resource exported to the West. This new exploitation, though, is also a return as the West trades yet again in African bodies, this time in silent fragmented pieces. When Elvis asks about the sedated children in the truck, Redemption says,

“Yes, dose children will arrive in Saudi alive, den, depend on de demand, dey will harvest de parts from dem. Fresh, no damage, more money for all of dem.”

“And none of the Americans ask questions about where the organs come from?”

“Like I said, if your only child dey die, you go ask question?” (243)

As in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Abani’s novel explicitly addresses the US reader: “you go ask question?” These questions—which demand an answer, not simply a listening—require the addressee to consider his or her own position. Abani has stated in an interview that the media interest that arises around historical trauma occurs “when a trauma becomes a Western trauma. As with much of the world’s problems, they become public—or much more of interest—the moment they begin to impact the West” (Kaufman 3). How is the addressee implicated in the ability of trauma to be heard or silenced? How is the life and identity of the listener or reader built upon a privilege maintained through this erasure? This is the implication not fully drawn out by Caruth when she states, “This speaking and this listening—a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma*—does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts” (“Introduction” 11). Returning to *Clorinda*, both novels suggest that Tancred repeats his traumatic wounding of her because he fails to listen the first time. Silence is the result of questions unspoken and stories avoided.

*GraceLand* speaks from the site of trauma by insisting that the details—the materiality of experience, of poverty and repression—be told. The black market incident and the subsequent narrow escape forces Elvis to flee his home in the company of another mentor: The King of the Beggars, a traveling dramatist and social protestor. This path also provides him no direction, as he is ultimately arrested and tortured as part of a crackdown on political street performances. In recounting his imprisonment and torture, the novel takes advantage of its third-person narrator to prevent the events of trauma from receding into the gray, murky waters of memory. Although Elvis’s memory of the events of his arrest remain muddled and unclear, the narration of these is particular and specific: “The inner tubing of a bicycle tire was used to flog him; it left no marks and yet stung like nothing he knew. Then a concentrated solution of Izal, an industrial disinfectant, was poured over the beaten area. This not only increased the pain, it sensitized the area for the next bout of flogging. He screamed until he lost his voice; still his throat convulsed” (289). The narrative outlines the mechanics of torture, forcing the reader to confront rather than to evade the materiality of trauma. While cognitively the event shatters understanding, the physicality of the body experiences the event: “Elvis felt his feet touch the floor. He collapsed in a heap, unable to feel his body. No, that wasn’t quite right. He could feel his body—but as a single sheet of flaming pain” (293). The narrative makes sure to articulate carefully what transpires so as to prevent the possibility of denial or abstraction. Such use of the elements of realism insists upon trauma not just as an experience of the psyche but also as an event of the body that is recorded

and felt in the moment it occurs. The possibility of trauma fiction is just this ability to counter the psychic shattering of the trauma victim with details that record concrete, tangible experiences.

The narrative economy of *GraceLand*, however, disrupts the reassurance of understanding and knowing invoked by Abani's realist descriptions. Five different narrative pieces are woven together in the text: a description of the kola nut ritual by the community, a Western anthropological description of the kola nut ritual, the story of Elvis's life in Lagos, the story of Elvis's early life in Afikpo, and fragments from the journal of Elvis's mother that includes recipes, prayers, and descriptions of herbs. The contrast between the two descriptions of the kola nut ritual is significant as each makes the ceremony meaningful in dissimilar ways, demonstrating how alternative discourses and signifying systems record reality differently. The first account of the ritual describes the cultural importance of the tradition to those who belong within the community while the second addresses those outside the community who would approach the ritual as an artifact. For example, the telling of the ceremony describes the meaning of the different lobes on the kola nut: "Three lines on the King's head mark the turning. These people, rarer than the two, bring new things, sing new songs." In contrast, the anthropological description entered just below it states, "The Igbo have a very abstract mathematical system. Recent anthropological data suggests that they knew about and used pi before the Greeks; that they had in fact begun to explore ideas that we now call quantum mechanics. Though there are many treatises on this, it is hard to determine what was there and what has been brought to this thesis by modern scholarship" (89). This second passage is emblematic of how the West approaches the peoples of Africa as objects to be examined and explored. The contrast and inclusion of both voices challenges the authority of the Western knowing subject in its signification of Africa. In addition, the introduction of the kola nut ritual provides both meaning and dissonance to Elvis's search for manhood. The ceremony says, "This is a journey to manhood, to life; it cannot be easy" (284). Thus, the presence of this ceremony in the narrative is also the introduction of a specific Igbo framework for understanding a young boy's journey to manhood and the history of the clan. At the same time, the gap between this ritual and Elvis's actual experiences makes evident the trauma of colonialism/neocolonialism that has resulted in a loss of traditional ceremonies that interpret and make meaning out of the chaos of existence.

In the final pages, as Elvis leaves for America with a false passport and a new name, the narrative once again disrupts the narratives of the West, particularly of the United States. Its closing resists Western clichés of desperate refugees, who are happy to leave for America. At the same time as his departure offers him the possibility of redemption and becoming, Elvis understands that "there was no guarantee he would survive in America" (318). As he boards the plane, he carries in his hands a copy of James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*: "As

he read, Elvis began to see a lot of parallels between himself and the description of a dying black man slowly being engulfed by flames. The man's hands using the chains that bound him as leverage to pull himself up and out of the torture. He flinched at the part where the unnamed white man in the story cut off the lynched black man's genitalia" (319). The connection Elvis makes with the characters from Baldwin's book unites the struggle of Africans and African Americans. The book repels the voyeuristic gaze of the Western subject who looks upon black Africa as something primal and violent by reminding him of the violence in his own world and community: "He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. And yet beyond that, he was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face. He and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire" (320). The image of the lynched and burning black man that depicts for Elvis the trauma of his own experiences is also an image of the treatment of Africans and their descendants around the globe, for example in the United States, where Baldwin grew up and where Elvis is headed. His body and the bodies of other black men, offering a historical record of what "no metaphor could contain," confront the world with a materiality that exceeds language, but the reality of which is difficult to ignore.

The significance of these readings is the proposal that the transformation of the address needs to lie not in bringing the Other into language and signification but in transforming the addressee so that he or she is capable of hearing what is being spoken. Both of these novels insist that in order to theorize the colonial subject within trauma theory, first the binary structure put in place by colonialism must be deconstructed and the inter-involvement between Western addressee and traumatic witness acknowledged. These contemporary Nigerian novels reimagine the relationship between Tancred and Clorinda by demonstrating that the Other of trauma is not an impossibility. E. Ann Kaplan suggests that "impossible" (61) representations of the Other exoticize and sentimentalize silence. Rather than view trauma's Other in indecipherable terms, Kaplan suggests that we look instead for specific local "embodied translators" who make connections across the impossibility of trauma (53, 62). Both texts, along with their protagonists Ugwu and Elvis, perform such an act of translation by implicating the Western subject and contesting its privileged position as detached observer. Foregrounding the Western addressee's role in the creation and interpretation of these events, *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* dispel the myth of trauma's unrepresentability and of the trauma survivor as silent Other.

### Unheard Voices

Before concluding, I wish to consider briefly the intersection between gender and trauma in these postcolonial texts. While rethinking the relationship

of address between Africa and the West, between trauma victim and knowing listener, these novels do not yet theorize the possibility of *Clorinda's* voice, of a female African voice. Female voices still remain cut off and silenced. To explore this narrative repression, I want first to trace the development of three images in *Half of a Yellow Sun*: the image of the pot, the severed head, and the lost female voice. One of the most traumatic images of the novel is that of a severed head in a calabash. This event is recounted three times in the novel; the first account comes in the initial fragment from Ugwu's book:

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.

Olanna tells him this story and he notes the details. She tells him how the 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 braids falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O. (82)

The repeated return to this image of a young girl's severed head inside a bowl marks one site of repetition that the mostly linear flow of the narrative cannot move beyond. The text stumbles against the materiality of these remains. The image functions as a symbol of the silencing of women's traumatic experience.

The bowl and the girl's severed head within it is picked up in another image: that of the roped pot and its relationship to Olanna's sister Kainene. The image of this pot is first introduced with Richard, who comes to Africa because of the fabulous Igbo pot, an image to him of the culture and history of these people. In tracing this pot, Richard acquires instead his Nigerian lover Kainene, who is for him a manifestation of the beautiful pot that drew him to Africa. At the novel's end, as Richard searches for Kainene, who is missing, he "showed them Kainene's picture. Sometimes, in his rush, he pulled out the picture of the roped pot instead" (407). Kainene is to Richard an embodiment of native Nigeria and to the reader a figure of what remains lost, silenced, and severed. Just before the war ends, Kainene crosses military lines in search of black-market food to bring back to the refugee camp, but she never returns. Despite all efforts to locate her, no word or evidence of her is found. As the novel closes, Olanna remains committed to finding her sister. Futilely seeking out a *dibia* for a ritual that might bring her sister back, Olanna says, "I do believe in it. I believe in everything. I believe in anything that will bring my sister home" (433). Kainene's absence haunts the closing of the text. A pragmatic and energetic voice throughout the book, her disappearance creates



a startling void in the narrative; while the situation may allow for Ugwu's voice, Kainene's retreats into silence.

In *GraceLand*, too, female voices are left echoing in the background of the text, not pulled in and integrated within the narrative. The novel has a number of significant female characters, but I want to consider most carefully the position in the narrative of Elvis's mother Beatrice, his grandmother Oye, his cousin Efua, and the street child Blessing. None of these female voices achieve a sense of agency at the novel's end, at which point both the grandmother and mother have died, and Blessing and Efua remain unaccounted for on the streets of Lagos. The voice of female experience is best represented in the novel by the fragments of the mother's journal that appear throughout the novel. Put together by Beatrice and Oye, the journal embodies a history of women's lives and customs. This journal, excerpts of which come in between the past and present chapters about Elvis, is "a collection of cooking and apothecary recipes and some other unrelated bits, like letters and notes about things that seemed as arbitrary as the handwriting: all that he had inherited from her, all that he had to piece her life together" (11). Possessing its own kind of knowledge, the journal offers a record of the past very different from that which focuses on the large-scale events of public life: "Elvis closed his book and watched as Beatrice wrote down a recipe for an herbal treatment that Oye was dictating to her. He watched her spidery handwriting spread across the page as though laying claim to an ancient kingdom." When he asks what she is doing, Elvis is told: "she is writing down the things she wants to remember her next life" (44). The journal embodies the cultural memory of women as it records a way of living and caring for others. It inscribes an identity that is increasingly lost from contemporary Nigerian life, which the absence of these characters from the novel's narrative present exemplifies. In this way, the presence of the journal in the narrative as a whole directs our attention to the traumatic loss of women's traditional culture in Nigeria and of the way in which that story remains isolated from the narrative of neocolonial trauma that is Elvis's story.

Blessing and Efua also haunt the novel's closure, reminding the reader of the ongoing struggle that Elvis leaves behind. Like Kainene, they remain unaccounted for at the novel's end while still circulating within the narrative economy of the text. Efua, raped by her father, runs away from home; and although Elvis wonders where she might be, he takes no steps to locate her: "Lagos is big. She could be anywhere" (170). Blessing, the young girl prostituting herself in the streets for survival, takes on the responsibility of caring for Elvis although she is only twelve. However, when he leaves for America, she, like Efua, is left behind. Thus, while the narrative propels Elvis towards a place where he has at least the potential for achieving a voice, these young women are left lost on the streets of Lagos. And although the narrative of the novel includes the voice of Elvis's mother, embodied by her journal, it is one that Elvis finds silent: "It had never revealed his mother to him. Never

helped him understand her, or his life, or why anything had happened the way it had. What was the point? Nothing is ever resolved, he thought. It just changes” (320). Boarding the plane for the United States, Elvis’s story brings the trajectory of masculinity (described in the kola nut ritual) to the brink of becoming, but the record of a particular feminine history (represented by Beatrice’s journal) remains unheard.

Both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *GraceLand* remain locked into a dichotomous vision of women as victims and men as social agents. Recent work in African feminist theory has called for the need “to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways” (Nnaemeka 3). This is exactly what the texts do show in their representations of Ugwu and Elvis, yet they remain surprisingly silent on such possibilities for women.<sup>4</sup> Huma Ibrahim explores how the discourse of “victimhood” locks Third-World women into a rigid binary, positioning them as “victim” needing to be saved by Western intervention: “The subject/object notion of victimization deifies the ‘victim’ with all the fervor reserved for an ancient and capricious goddess, freezing the victim in an immovable object space determined by the dominant discursive desire of the subject identity” (150). Yet, the women of these novels, while seemingly voiceless, are not simply victims. Kainene is the most active figure of *Half of a Yellow Sun* until her disappearance. Efua comforts Elvis after he too is raped by her father. And Blessing, despite her own victimization, cares for Elvis on the street. Trauma theory is founded upon this dichotomous vision of victimhood, which relies on a rigid distinction between knowing subject and passive object.<sup>5</sup> *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* dispute this binary by refuting the epistemological power of the Western subject, yet at the same time, they succumb to it by reproducing the representation of African women as trauma’s Other. In doing so, however, they highlight the failures of trauma theory to grapple with the specificities of colonialism and gender.

The trauma narratives told in *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are situated in the discursive intersections of trauma, gender, and neocolonialism. The detailed depictions in both novels bring forth colonized voices that refute and challenge the erasure and misrepresentation of Africa by a Western knowing subject. In this way, the Other does not remain a site of impossibility although both stories fail to fully give voice to female experiences of neocolonial trauma despite the attempts of their authors. As such, the novels instruct readers about the working of postcolonial trauma narratives and trauma theory more generally. The way in which neocolonialism registers in the everyday lives of women as they work to earn a living and care for their families often remains unnoticed when the large-scale effects of colonialism—such as genocide, enslavement, and loss of identity—upon a culture are studied. Returning to Freud’s analogy, is it not significant that for Clorinda to even have a voice in Tasso’s narrative, she must first adopt the subject position of a man: that of warrior? How might trauma

theory direct more attention to the ways that trauma alters the daily activities of working, mothering, and nurturing that are part of so many women's lives? The lives of the women in these stories suggest that the failure of Western trauma theory to account for a gendered, racialized Other is due to its positioning of a very specific conception of the subject at the heart of its psychoanalytic drama. While presented as a neutral and universal formulation for healing, trauma theory is actually the product of a culturally specific (Western Enlightenment) concept of the Self occupying the space of speaking subject, addressing the listener, and mastering the past. But the focus of trauma theory on confronting and working through the past is not necessarily first in the minds of trauma survivors preoccupied with the importance of feeding families, finding a home, and returning to work. In addition, there may be other structural barriers, as is the case with Efuwa and Blessing: as women, they do not possess the social mobility that Elvis does, which prevents their voices from being heard. By examining further the dynamics of traumatic address and learning to listen for the voices that still cannot be heard, we can rethink the application of trauma theory and psychoanalysis as universal meta-narratives and recognize instead their incompleteness.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further analysis of how this analogy represents an erasure of gender from the theory of trauma, see my discussion in "Gendering Trauma."

<sup>2</sup> Eze suggests that this group is characterized by "a shift from the postcolonial concern of blame to the inner, transcultural one within the African socio-political setup....They do not 'write back' to the Empire in the classic fashion of postcolonial textualities. Rather they focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space with the goal of enhancing human flourishing there" (109-10). See also Hewett's analysis of Adichie's first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (75). While I agree with the formulations of both critics, I would emphasize that this examination of transnationality is still firmly located in Nigeria. As such, these writers are concerned with life lived amidst the competing realities of neocolonialism in contemporary Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup> Differentiating the neo- and postcolonial Shohat states:

[t]he term *postcolonial* carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative traces in the present. The postcolonial inadvertently glosses over the fact that, even in the post-cold war era, global hegemony persists in forms other than overt colonial rule. As a signifier of a new historical epoch, when compared with *neocolonialism*, the term *postcolonial* comes equipped with little evocation of contemporary power relations. (132)

Hence, I employ the concept "neocolonial" as a periodizing category that refers to Nigeria's current social/economic/cultural matrix and retain "postcolonial" as a descriptive literary term that articulates the resistance and critique of writing such as *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

<sup>4</sup> Of both novels, Olanna alone remains an active female subject, but her agency is compromised as it is tied up in locating Kainene. She follows Kainene's last steps and rumors of her appearance, which are dislocated from the present: "'Our 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" (433).

<sup>5</sup> Summerfield formulates a persuasive critique of the universal application of trauma theory and psychoanalysis (29).

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