Sovereign Fictions: Self-Determination and the Literature of the Nigeria-Biafra War

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores questions of African literature and international law through the lens of the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970). A defining trauma of modern Nigerian history, the war produced a rich and sustained vein of writing that stretches from the late 1960s through the present day, encompassing canonical Nigerian novels as well as a number of British and diasporic texts. Drawing on both literary and legal theory, I argue that this body of work mobilizes particular literary features—including narrative, analogy, allegory, and genre—to articulate both familiar and innovative logics of sovereignty. The structure of the project is primarily conceptual and loosely chronological. The first half explores narratives of development in relation to international law’s standard of civilization, focusing on British colonial writing (Chapter 1) and postwar allegorical novels (Chapter 2). The second half attends to how narrative fiction formally registers mid-20th century developments in international law, focusing on writers’ use of analogy as a mode of theorizing genocide (Chapter 3) and the role of genre fiction in imagining economic sovereignty (Chapter 4). Throughout, I show how novelists pick up and transform literary tropes first articulated in wartime journalism, propaganda, and activist pamphlets.
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Introduction

This dissertation explores competing articulations of postcolonial sovereignty in the literature of the Nigeria-Biafra war, beginning with novels written as the war was being fought and concluding in the early 21st century. Though it lasted fewer than three years (1967-1970), the war produced an extraordinarily rich vein of writing; contemporaries "speculated on whether more blood or more ink was being spilt on the battlefronts."¹ Many of the most famous Nigerian writers of the 20th century wrote from within the war machine—as journalists, soldiers, and prisoners, as well as observers. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a canonical 20th century Nigerian writer who does not engage with the war or its legacy. I draw on this established body of war literature—including the work of Chinua Achebe, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—as well as the work of less canonical (though very popular) Nigerian writers such as Eddie Iroh. Equally important to the project is a more obscure archive of Biafra-focused British novels. The latter—including works by Frederick Forsyth, Auberon Waugh, and William Boyd—testify to the intense pro-Biafra activism that emerged in the UK in the late 1960s, much of it critical of the British government's support for Nigeria. In working with British as well as Nigerian writings, I highlight the former colonial power's significant role in both the material and discursive fight over Biafran secession.

One of the striking features of this body of literature is the degree of overlap between those who wrote the war and those who worked to support the Biafran state and its political and military aims. Celebrated writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Gabriel Okara experienced the war as employees and affiliates of Biafra’s powerful propaganda directorate; Christopher Okigbo,

perhaps Nigeria’s most celebrated poet, joined the Biafran army and was killed in action defending the university town of Nsukka. In the UK, novelists Frederick Forsyth and Auberon Waugh were, at the time, better known for their pro-Biafra writing and political activism. The tight interconnection between writers and the material and institutional realities of the war has prompted many scholars to frame the conflict as an “intellectual’s war.” This appellation has, at times, taken on a mythologizing tint that unhelpfully obscures the very real devastation that the war wrought on Biafra’s civilian population, most of whom were not intellectuals. Still, there is no question that writers (and writing) were central to the management and prosecution of the war itself.

Drawing on legal and literary theory alike, this dissertation explores how postwar novels reimagine the profound contestations over postcolonial sovereignty that marked the 1960s. This was a time of extraordinary innovation in international law, much of it driven by formerly colonized states working through the UN General Assembly to craft a post-imperial international order. Central to this project was a new account of self-determination, which anticolonial nationalists framed as both a foundational human right and an essential basis for an international society free of European domination. Drawing on years of thinking and organizing through fora such as the Fifth Pan-African Congress, the West Indies National Emergency Committee, and the Bandung Conference, these anticolonial leaders brought self-determination to the fore in UN debates over the shape of the post-imperial future. In 1960, the General Assembly passed Resolution 1514 (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples), which declared that "all peoples have the right to self-determination" and framed colonialism as a denial of

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2 On Okigbo’s relationship to Biafra see Obi Nwakanma, *Christopher Okigbo, 1930-67: Thirsting for Sunlight* (Ibadan: HEBN, 2010), 229-258.
"fundamental human rights." The right to self-determination was subsequently articulated as the first right named in both international rights Covenants of 1966—a notable shift from the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, which had not mentioned self-determination at all. As Adom Getachew notes, these changes were not a natural extension of the existing Westphalian state system or of Wilsonian self-determination, but instead the result of "an anti-imperial project that went beyond the inclusion of new states to demand an expansive vision of an egalitarian world order."

At the same time, political realities on the ground were in flux, raising questions about how the revitalized language of self-determination might push up against the sovereignty of newly independent states. For as the Katanga crisis and the short-lived Niger Delta Republic demonstrated in the early 1960s, the line between self-determination and secession was hazy; if colonies could claim the right to self-determination, so too could minorities within newly decolonized states. At stake here were the parameters of the group that ostensibly enjoyed the right to self-determination. Would "a people" be understood in national terms, as Nigerians or Congolese? Or might "a people" be framed in terms of narrower affiliations of region, ethnicity, or language? If the push for self-determination was truly an anticolonial project, then why take colonial boundaries as sacrosanct? Biafran activists would draw on this line of thinking to argue that Nigeria itself was an unnatural colonial creation, suturing together peoples who had little in common historically, politically, or culturally; the right to self-determination simply allowed its diverse peoples to chart their own independent paths forward. For Nigeria, however, "self-determination" denoted the right to exist as an independent, equal member of an equitable international community—and to be free from

\[5\] General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, (December 14 1960), https://undocs.org/A/Res/1514(XV).
external meddling in its internal affairs, including the Biafran conflict. The Nigeria-Biafra war thus demonstrates with particular clarity the inherent flexibility and multivalence of the term, illustrating how sovereignty itself becomes an arena of struggle between unequal political and legal actors.7

Using the war's rich body of literature as a test case, this dissertation examines how international legal sovereignty works in and through the formal logics of narrative fiction. While often considered an abstract legal concept, the notion of sovereignty draws on both the "official" political discourse and the subtler, slower work of cultural narratives. My project is thus grounded in the conviction that, as legal scholar Robert Cover puts it, legal and literary texts contribute jointly to a nomos, or normative universe. Simply put, cultural narratives cultivate certain intuitions about what is just, intuitions that may anticipate, confirm, or contest norms articulated in the law. These cultural narratives may take many forms—from radio dramas to fairy tales, films to poems to television. In focusing primarily on narrative fiction, I build on recent scholarship that argues for the importance of the literary in shaping historical shifts in thinking about international law. I argue that the cultural imaginary undergirding the legal structure of sovereignty is constituted and contested through particular literary features such as narrative, analogy, allegory, and genre.

The structure of the project is primarily conceptual and loosely chronological. The first two chapters explore the trope of development in relation to international law's standard of civilization, while the second two chapters look to literature's relation to new developments in international law that marked the mid- to late-20th century. Throughout the project, I demonstrate the ways in which postwar novelists pick up and transform literary tropes first articulated in wartime news coverage and propaganda. One of the big-picture contributions of this research is thus to establish the degree

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of interpenetration between war novels and more ephemeral, political texts. I argue that these fictions were a critical arena in which visions of postcolonial sovereignty were contested in the late 20th century.

**Historical Background to the Nigeria-Biafra War**

My central focus is the literature of the Nigeria-Biafra war, a devastating conflict in the late 1960s in which the southeast part of Nigeria declared itself the Independent Republic of Biafra. Nigeria fought to retain the territory and eventually succeeded, at great cost. The war dragged on for two and a half brutal years, even as a Nigerian-imposed blockade of the East led to mass starvation of the civilian population. International news reporting highlighted the plight of Biafra’s starving children, and the image of the starving African child became a visual shorthand for the presumed failure of the promise of African sovereignty. In January 1970, the Federal Government of Nigeria succeeded in forcing a Biafran capitulation, and the war ended. Though the reintegration of Biafran into Nigeria was less punitive than many had feared, wounds ran deep. Nigeria undertook no formal process of reconciliation or justice, and today the war remains a deep and little-discussed chasm in Nigerian politics and culture.

The outbreak of war can be traced to many proximate causes, but one overarching problem looms central: deep uncertainty over the coherence of the Nigerian nation. When Nigeria gained independence from the British Empire in 1960, its boundaries, governance structure, and regional divisions had been profoundly shaped by British administration. Most significantly, the British colonial administration had governed Southern Nigeria quite differently than Northern Nigeria. In

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8 A great deal of debate centers on what to call the war. Following recent scholarship, I use the terms "Nigerian Civil War," "Nigeria-Biafra War," and "Biafran War" interchangeably. Typically, those who see Biafra as an illegitimate rebel movement favor the first, while those who see it as a state that briefly existed favor the latter. Given how frequently the term "Biafra" comes up, I have also chosen not to use the quotation marks ("Biafra") that some writers deploy to indicate the aspirational nature of Biafran statehood.
the North, where the policy of indirect rule was developed, the British essentially coopted the administrative superstructure that had governed the Sokoto Caliphate. In the South, however, existing governance structures did not mesh well with British expectations. As a result, colonial administrators tried more strenuously to shape indigenous political institutions. Not incidentally, the South was also far more open to Protestant and Catholic missionaries, which contributed to the growth of Christianity and English literacy across this region.

For largely budgetary reasons, the British “amalgamated” these two distinct protectorates in 1914, creating the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Yet this political amalgamation did little to change the actual governance structures, and the North and South of the newly unified colony continued along quite separate lines. During the 1940s and 1950s, a series of new constitutions—developed by British leaders with limited though increasing indigenous input—further contributed to the consolidation of regionally based ethnic identities. The first of these Constitutions, the 1946 Richards Constitution, split the South into half, creating the three major divisions that would dominate the next several decades: a largely Hausa/Fulani North, a largely Yoruba West, and a largely Igbo East.9 Two more constitutions in 1951 and 1954 solidified the state’s federal governance structure, expanding and devolving greater power on the three regional assemblies, while general elections throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to the consolidation of largely ethnic, regionally based political parties.10

The development of such powerful regional political affiliations meant that the balance of power among the three regions was perpetually contested. The great fear, on all sides, was

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10 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 152-53. These were the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (later the National Council of Nigerian Citizens) in the East; the Action Group in the West; and the Northern People’s Congress in the North.
“domination.” Northern leaders feared domination by the West and East; the East and West feared domination by the North. By the early 1960s, the federal system that attempted to balance regional interests, had, in the words of historians Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, “devolved into utter dysfunction.” Political crises snowballed: a grotesquely manipulated 1962 census, widespread intimidation and obstruction of the 1964 federal elections, and fraudulent 1965 Western regional elections that led to rioting and violence in the streets. By the mid-1960s, many Nigerians had come to believe that the federal structure was unworkable and that dramatic change was necessary if Nigeria was to survive. If these regional tensions were the deep cause of Nigeria's fracture, the immediate cause was a series of massacres of Igbo civilians between May and September 1966. A response to a military coup and the perceived threat of Igbo domination, the massacres killed tens of thousands and caused hundreds of thousands to flee to the East. These killings were, in retrospect, a breaking point. Though various meetings and conferences through late 1966 and early 1967 attempted to find a way forward for a united Nigeria, leaders were unable to agree. Eastern leader Chukwuemeka Ojukwu increasingly insisted that Easterners were not safe in Nigeria and needed either significant

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13 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 173. The year began with a military coup that killed the country's (Northern) Prime Minister and ushered into power a new, Igbo leader, Maj. General Aguiyi-Ironsi. Aguiyi-Ironsi appointed new military governors in each of the three regions—including, in the East, Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka (“Emeka”) Odumegwu Ojukwu, the future leader of Biafra. Given the many failures of the old regime, the military coup was initially received with cautious optimism in much of the country. But within a few months, many Northerners began to suspect that the new regime was in fact a bid for Southern—and especially Igbo—domination. Most troubling to worried Northerners was Aguiyi-Ironsi's Decree No. 34, which in May 1966 abolished the country's federal system, replacing the regions with a plan to govern from the center. The proclamation of the decree was followed by two events with far reaching consequences. One was a second military coup: in July, a group of Northern soldiers killed Aguiyi-Ironsi and replaced him with a new head of state, thirty-one-year-old Yakubu (“Jack”) Gowon. The second was an ongoing series of mass killings that targeted Igbos and other Easterners throughout the North, many of which were condoned (tacitly or explicitly) by local leaders and police in the North.
14 Numbers are difficult to ascertain with any certainty. See Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 174 and John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 38. Falola and Heaton estimate 80,000 to 100,000 Easterners were killed in these massacres; Stremlau says "5,000 to 50,000," while acknowledging that estimates range as high as 200,000.

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autonomy or total independence. In January 1967, Nigerian leader Yakubu Gowon attempted to reach an accord with Ojukwu in Aburi, Ghana; the deal subsequently fell apart over differing interpretations of what decentralization entailed.\textsuperscript{15} In March, Ojukwu claimed the right to take over all federal taxes and revenues in the East, essentially making it independently administered.\textsuperscript{16} Gowon retaliated by imposing economic sanctions and a blockade and, on May 30\textsuperscript{th} 1967, Ojukwu declared the independence of the new Republic of Biafra. War between Nigeria and Biafra began in July.

The fighting that ensued was longer and more brutal than almost anyone had anticipated. The Federal government initially saw the war as a police action that would last a few weeks, perhaps months. Indeed, the Federal government made quick initial advances, capturing the important university town of Nsukka a mere two weeks into the war. Yet Biafra managed several surprising victories over the next few months.\textsuperscript{17} In early October, however, Nigerian troops captured the Biafran capital, Enugu, forcing the Biafran government south to Umuahia. A few weeks later, Federal forces also took the southern port city of Calabar. Throughout late 1967 and early 1968, Federal forces chipped away at Biafra’s claimed territory, forcing its military and civilian population into the Igbo heartland of the former East Central State. In May 1968, Nigerian troops captured Port Harcourt, regaining control of the area's oil production and severing Biafra's final link to the sea.\textsuperscript{18} At this point, it seemed that a Federal victory might be imminent. Yet Biafra refused to surrender; after the massacres of 1966, many Igbo saw the war as a fight for survival against a genocidal enemy. Though Biafra never again militarily threatened Federal territory, the nascent state

\textsuperscript{16} Falola and Heaton, \textit{A History of Nigeria}, 175.
\textsuperscript{17} In August 1967, Biafran troops invaded the Mid-West region, captured Benin, and advanced as far as Ore—threatening both Ibadan and Lagos. A few days later, Biafran aircraft bombed Lagos, killing several civilians. This attack jolted Nigeria into action; Federal troops quickly recaptured Ore and Benin, ultimately pushing Biafran troops back across the Niger River.
managed to withstand a war of attrition largely through a canny propaganda campaign, humanitarian aid, and the support of a committed civilian population. Biafran resistance finally collapsed in January 1970, two and a half years after the war had begun.\textsuperscript{19} All told, the war killed between one and three million people, mostly Easterners.\textsuperscript{20}

International involvement crucially shaped this course of events. Nigeria benefited from the support of the Organization of African Unity, which endorsed the notion that the war was an internal conflict best addressed by Nigeria, as well as the de-facto support of most African countries, for whom the prospect of a breakaway region was unattractive. In addition, British and Soviet military support provided essential material aid to Nigeria. The UK, anticipating a quick federal victory, took the "course of least resistance" by supporting its former colony.\textsuperscript{21} In the weeks leading up to the war, the British urged the Biafran leadership to reconsider secession. Once the war had begun, the UK pressured Shell-BP to refuse to pay oil royalties to the Biafran government, cutting off what might have been a key source of income for the nascent state.\textsuperscript{22} Most importantly, the British provided significant military aid to the Nigerian government. According to Suzanne Cronje (a critic of British policy), British military aid to Nigeria rose from roughly seventy-seven

\textsuperscript{19} Ojukwu fled to Ivory Coast on January 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1970; his second-in-command surrendered the next day.

\textsuperscript{20} Falola and Heaton, \textit{A History of Nigeria}, 180.


\textsuperscript{22} Stremlau, \textit{The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970}, 76. Immediately after the Biafran Declaration of Independence, both Biafra and Nigeria claimed that commercial petroleum extraction in what had been the Eastern Region fell under their auspices—and thus that any companies working there owed both royalties and taxes to their government. While in theory this issue affected a number of different oil companies, in practice it became a conflict with Shell-BP in particular, for two reasons. First, Shell-BP was far and away the primary oil producer in Nigeria at the time, responsible for 84\% of Nigerian oil production: most of the oil money at stake was tied to Shell-BP’s concessions. Second, Shell-BP was in the unique position of operating in both contested Biafran-held territory and within straightforwardly Nigerian territory (in Midwest State). This put Shell BP in a tricky situation—wanting to retain access to its installations in the East by appeasing Biafra, but wary of antagonizing the Federal Government, which could if it chose undermine the company’s prospects in the Midwest. Through June and July 1967, Shell BP carried on a series of contorted negotiations with the Biafran and Nigerian governments, attempting to curry favor on all sides. But the company’s attempt to please them both was short-lived: by late July 1967, Federal forces had captured the export terminal at Bonny. While Federal forces would not regain control of all of Shell-BP’s drilling fields and the production facility at Port Harcourt until May 1968, the quick recapture of Bonny caused Shell-BP to stop seriously considering paying royalties to the Biafran government.
thousand pounds in 1966 to nearly 12 million pounds in 1969.\textsuperscript{23} One reason for this was Nigeria's canny maneuvering between the British and the Soviets; throughout the conflict, Gowon was able to assure continued British military aid by reminding UK leaders that he would "deal with the devil" (that is, the Soviets) if the UK failed to provide adequate military support.\textsuperscript{24} Despite growing domestic opposition to the weapons sales, the UK continued this support through the war's end.\textsuperscript{25}

Biafra sought military aid as well—but most of all, it sought diplomatic recognition. Only five countries ever gave it: Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Zambia, and Haiti (all in 1968). In response to pressure from Ivory Coast and Gabon, the French government announced in July 1968 that the Biafrans had "demonstrated their will to assert themselves as a people" and that conflict must be resolved with an eye to "the right of peoples to self-determination."\textsuperscript{26} Yet France never recognized Biafra, much to the latter's frustration (and despite strong pro-Biafra sentiment among the French public).\textsuperscript{27} Beyond the French, Biafra received limited support from Portugal (the last major colonial power in Africa), South Africa, and Rhodesia—all three relatively unappealing allies driven less by a commitment to Biafran self-determination than by a desire to break up Black Africa's wealthiest and most populous country. Biafra also made overtures to Israel and China, though to little effect.\textsuperscript{28}

If diplomatic and military support for Biafra remained relatively limited, however, humanitarian aid did not.

\textsuperscript{23} Quoted in Rothchild, “Unofficial Mediation and the Nigeria-Biafra War,” 48.
\textsuperscript{24} Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970, 79-80. Gowon did, indeed, acquire fighter aircrafts and military trainers from the Soviets in the first months of the war (Stremlau 79-80). So although the Nigerian Civil War unfolded in a Cold War context, it never became proxy war in the way that, for example, the Congo Crisis (earlier in the 1960s) or the Angolan Civil War (beginning in the 1970s) were.
\textsuperscript{27} Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970, 233. Though much has been made of back-channel French military support for Biafra, this support was in fact quite limited. Ojukwu's chief of staff, Phillip Effiong, spoke for many in the Biafran government when he reflected, of French support: "the bastards did more harm than good by raising false hopes and by providing the British with an excuse to reinforce Nigeria" (as quoted by Stremlau).
By mid-1968, the Nigerian economic blockade and the ongoing fighting had begun to cause widespread malnutrition and some starvation within Biafran territory; international media coverage of starving civilians—especially children—led to an unprecedented mobilization by religious and humanitarian organizations to provide relief to the Biafran population. This aid operation—the largest privately run relief operation in history—funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into keeping Biafrans (and Biafra) alive. Unquestionably, the humanitarian aid saved lives. But it also fueled the war in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. To a remarkable degree, Biafra managed to set the terms of the aid it received, effecting "rapid and dramatic improvements" to the battered Biafran economy. At the same time, relief flights from Sao Tome, Libreville, and Fernando Po provided cover for arms trafficking, enabling Biafra to hold out militarily despite devastating losses in March, April, and May of 1968. Without the aid operation, Biafra would likely have lost the war by the end of 1968. One of the unresolved questions of the war is whether this remarkable humanitarian effort, by enabling Biafra to keep fighting, ultimately cost more lives than it saved.

The surge of humanitarian aid that began in June 1968 profoundly shaped outsiders' perspective of the war. At the very moment when "Biafra" became a household term beyond Nigeria, the politics of the civil war itself "vanished from view, hidden behind the iconography of humanitarian distress." The imagery of Biafra's starving children—all fragile limbs and swollen bellies—offered a visual shorthand for the weakness and fragility of this would-be nation-state. The iconography of starving children also suggested to Western viewers a new figure for postcoloniality:

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30 Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*, 238. For example, Biafra insisted that relief agencies exchange their foreign currency for local Biafran pounds in order to buy Biafran produce for feeding centers. This arrangement meant that aid agencies' foreign currency became available to the Biafran government and was used to purchase arms and pay for propaganda, shoring up the Biafran war effort.
not the liberation fighter but the helpless infant. This shift was a key inflection point in a larger transformation of Western images of postcolonial Africa. No longer a hopeful place of growth and development, "Africa" became a space of victimhood, the "suffering Third World" in need of protection. In this way, the Nigeria-Biafra war had a profound effect on the history of humanitarianism—contributing in particular to a more interventionist stance by non-governmental organizations. One of the great ironies of this history is that the Biafran leadership themselves, through a deft propaganda campaign, contributed to the rhetorical depoliticization of their own cause.

Novels of the Nigeria-Biafra War

Historically speaking, the novels of the Nigeria-Biafra war fall into two broad categories. The first group is what we might call the canonical war literature, published in the 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s. These novels are largely realist and tend to focus on the waste and futility of war, often with a sharp eye for civilian suffering. In her 2000 study of the Nigerian novel, Wendy Griswold categorizes twenty-nine novels as war novels; nearly all predate 1985. This list includes works such as Sebastian Okechukwu Mezu’s *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971), Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again* (1975), Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Divided We Stand* (1980), and Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982). The vast majority of these novels—nearly ninety percent—are written by Igbo authors. “In fiction,” Wendy Griswold observes, “the story of the Nigerian civil war is being told by its losers.”

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33 A very direct manifestation of this shift is the gradual development of the “responsibility to protect” doctrine of humanitarian intervention, discussed in Chapter 3. More broadly, we might think about the rise of MSF’s témoignage as a pushback to the ICRC’s stated commitment to neutrality. See Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism*, 322.
35 Griswold, *Bearing Witness*, 42, 235. Griswold also notes that Igbo writers are overrepresented within Nigerian literature generally: just under 20% of Nigeria’s population is Igbo while roughly 50% of Nigerian novels are written by Igbo writers. This overrepresentation is even more dramatic when looking specifically at literature treating the Civil War.
The second category of war literature is both more recent and more varied. It emerges in the early 21st century, with books like Anthonia Kalu’s *Broken Lives and Other Stories* (2003) and Dulue Mbachu’s *War Games* (2005). Of particular significance is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2006 global bestseller *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2007 and was adapted into a film some years later. *Half of a Yellow Sun* in some sense brought “Biafra” into the global public consciousness in the 21st century. Yet Adichie also explicitly situates herself in a literary-historical genealogy, locating the novel’s roots in both family stories of life in wartime Biafra and in a large body of war literature from the 1970s and 80s (she lists thirty-some titles in an author’s note at the novel's end). Subsequent Biafra novels range from those that explicitly engage with this history (Tochi Onyebuchi’s *War Girls* (2019)) to those that touch on it in more oblique ways, such as Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* (2010) and Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004). Like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, most of the novels of this era are written by the children or grandchildren of those who survived the war—often writers who have grown up fully or partially outside of Nigeria, and whose interest in the war is less about witnessing and memory and more oriented towards using the war to think through contemporary problems from ethnic violence to the war on terror to climate change. These novels are more flexible and inventive in their retellings, treating the war’s history as inspiration rather than sacred text. My analysis of these recent novels reveal the ways in which the war’s legacy—continually reframed and reoriented—provides a lens through which to understand still-unsettled questions of law, rights, and justice.

Most studies of the literature of the Nigerian Civil War focus primarily on the earlier, more extensive body of literature authored by Nigerian/Biafran writers in the 1970 and 1980s. There are

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37 Adichie dedicates *Half of a Yellow Sun* to her grandfathers, who did not survive the war, and to her grandmothers, who did.
five major books exploring Nigerian civil war literature as a body of work. Two of these—Craig McLuckie's *Nigerian Civil War Literature: Seeking an "Imagined Community"* (1990) and Chinere Nwahunanya's *A Harvest from Tragedy* (1997)—take political community as a central concept. McLuckie's study focuses, as the title suggests, on how these novels imagine the Nigerian and Biafran nations (as well as the fractures within each). Despite its rather expansive title, McLuckie's book considers just five writers, all novelists writing in the 1970s and 1980s. Nwahunanya's edited collection—a wide-ranging survey oriented around genre—takes as its central focus the location of Nigerian war literature in relation to "the African political and literary experience." I share with these two early studies an interest in the relationship between literature and politics, and my project, like theirs, aims to illuminate how the war literature imagines forms of political and legal community. However, this dissertation considers questions of political community through the lens of international law—which is to say, I am interested in how the literature of Nigeria's civil war illuminates not only Nigerian, Biafran or African forms of community, but how it places (or fails to place) postcolonial sovereignty claims within the larger ambit of international society. In other words, I argue not only that Nigerian and Biafran writers use the form of the novel to articulate and interrogate claims to sovereignty, but that those claims must be read and understood in the context of the larger international legal system to which they were addressed.

This international scope is reflected in the body of texts that I examine. In contrast to most previous studies of Nigerian war literature, this dissertation also devotes significant attention to British literature reflecting on the war—as well as, in the first chapter, two British novels that

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39 They are Kole Omotoso, Cyprian Ekwensi, Sebastian Okechukwu Mezu, I.N.C Aniebo, and Wole Soyinka.

precede the war. This framing of my archive foregrounds the political and literary connections forged by colonial schools, migration, and publishing circuits. My commitment to reading Nigerian and British writings in relationship to each other is thus rooted in what Tejumola Olaniyan calls “the foundational premise of an irreversible imbrication of histories, and therefore cultures and cultural forms.” Taking seriously this imbrication of histories means rejecting any sharp divide between “Western” and “African” aesthetic categories—one reason that most of my chapters consider British and Nigerian writers together. This is not to suggest that nationality, identity, and social position are irrelevant—far from it—but rather to take as my analytic object the "shared but differentiated space of empire" rather than metropole or colony alone. As we shall see, this integration continues through the post-Independence history that is my primary focus here: indeed, British involvement in the civil war is a central topic for British and Nigerian writers alike. By including British writers within the scope of this project, I aim to show the degree to which Biafran imaginations of sovereignty were shaped by the cultural and legal framework of British colonization.

I want to comment briefly on two other features of the body of texts I explore in this project. First, I consider literary and popular fiction together. By ‘popular fiction,’ I mean simply fiction that is widely read, for pleasure or for edification. Such popular fiction is often (though not always) formulaic, and, perhaps for this reason, has often been skipped over by literary critics attuned to difficulty and innovation. (For instance, the most recent, extensive study of the war’s literature, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War (2016), contains no discussion of genre fiction at all.) Yet as Scott McCraken has argued in his study of popular fiction, it is the very conventionality of much genre

41 In a sense, even the straightforwardly “Nigerian” novels considered here have British roots: they are all written in English, and nearly all were initially published in the UK. As Wendy Griswold writes, the Nigerian novel—though conceived in Nigeria—“was born in London.” See Griswold, Bearing Witness, 61.
fiction that makes it a useful mirror for a society’s most vivid conflicts and tensions. So for example, the fourth chapter of this dissertation argues that the standardized conventions of the thriller, far from making the genre uninteresting, help elucidate a widespread critique of UK involvement in Nigeria’s war. I also give attention to speculative fiction such as Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* (in Chapter 3) and Tochi Onyebuchi’s *War Girls* (in the Coda), which retell elements of the Nigerian civil war though the generic tropes of science fiction and fantasy. Pushing into new genres, these recent novels eschew granular historical realism in favor of more speculative approaches.

Second, this dissertation gives sustained attention to the relationship between literary texts and journalism. In doing so, I draw on the work of Theodora Ezeigbo, whose *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War* (1991) is an early and ambitious exploration of the cross-pollination between journalism and fiction in war-writing. This dissertation’s investment in reading literary fiction in relation to nonfiction reporting builds on Ezeigbo’s mapping of this terrain; I am particularly attentive to how writers of fiction pick up, recycle, and/or transform tropes first articulated in wartime news coverage. In each of my first three chapters, I give sustained attention to a particular concept that marks wartime journalism and propaganda: civilization, the suffering child, and genocide. By analyzing how these concepts are articulated in both journalistic and fictional writing—and especially, how they move between the two realms—I argue that the “literary” writing of the war can’t be fully understood in isolation. Only by placing the larger canon of war novels in relation to a larger set of writing cultures can we recognize the ways in which authors use literary form, genre, and style to reinforce and/or complicate existing ways of imagining Biafran independence. Thus, my project pushes against a strict demarcation between literary and non-literary modes of writing—an orientation that emerges, in part, from the lived experience of the writers I

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examine. Many, if not most, of the writers considered here moved between writing novels and writing journalism: Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Joyce Cary, Frederick Forsyth, and Auberon Waugh, to name just a few. In turning an analytic eye to newspaper reports as well as novels, I take seriously the interconnections among these forms that these writers’ careers foreground.

**Law and Literature in Conversation**

While often considered an abstract legal concept, the notion of sovereignty draws on both formal legal discourse and the subtler, slower work of cultural narratives. My project is thus grounded in the conviction that, as legal scholar Robert Cover puts it, law and narrative are “inseparably related.” For Cover, legal and literary texts contribute jointly to a nomos, or normative universe:

> Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live…Every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse—to be supplied with history and destiny, beginning and end, explanation and purpose. And every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral. History and literature cannot escape their location in a normative universe, nor can prescription, even when embodied in a legal text, escape its origin and its end in experience, in the narratives that are the trajectories plotted upon material reality by our imaginations.

Within this overarching framing, we can imagine a range of different ways in which law and narrative might be connected. Here, I offer a brief account of four of these potential connections, rooted variously in law, history, and literary studies. From diverse angles, these scholars suggest the importance of the literary to what might seem to be unrelated legal and political questions.

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46 Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” 4-5.
Most straightforwardly, we might consider how literature depicts the law and legal issues. This was the approach taken by many legal scholars in the 1970s and early 1980s—roughly speaking, the "first wave" of law and literature scholarship.\(^\text{47}\) James Boyd White's *The Legal Imagination* (1973), for example, examines Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in order to comment on the justice of punishment. In a similar vein, Richard Weisberg developed a reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* that emphasizes its critique of how "the law twists reality into a false codified form."\(^\text{48}\) Other thinkers of this persuasion have focused on developing legally-inflected readings of Shakespeare,\(^\text{49}\) Melville,\(^\text{50}\) Kafka,\(^\text{51}\) and other writers who directly depict the operation of the law. A more recent version of this sort of argument is Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, which draws on readings of Walt Whitman and (especially) Charles Dickens to argue that the literary imagination can steer "judges in their judging [and] legislators in their legislating."\(^\text{52}\) Julie Stone Peters has usefully characterized this general approach to law and literature as "legal humanism."\(^\text{53}\) From this perspective, literature offers a kind of humanistic antidote to technocratic legal analysis, reconnecting legal thinking to an ethical core grounded in the complexity of human experience.

A second way that law and literature might be connected is causally: literature might spark legal change. Within the context of international humanitarian law, a foundational example is Henri Dunant's *A Memory of Solferino* (1862). An eyewitness account of the suffering and deaths of

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\(^\text{47}\) However, scholarly discussions of the relationship between law and literature date back much further, at least to Benjamin Cardozo's 1925 essay "Law and Literature."


wounded soldiers following the Battle of Solferino, Dunant's text contributed to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (1863) as well as the first Geneva Convention (1864), which governed the protection of wounded combatants.\textsuperscript{54} Of course, specifying exactly how such change happens is a tricky business, more the province of historians than of literary scholars. One compelling account of such a transformation is Lynn Hunt's \emph{Inventing Human Rights} (2007), which examines the development of human rights in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{55} Hunt argues that new reading practices in this period—especially the individual reading of epistolatory novels—created “new cultural practices of autonomy and empathy.”\textsuperscript{56} These new habits of mind, in turn, enabled readers to imagine new political and legal concepts—namely, human rights. Hunt’s approach is less a genealogy of contemporary human rights and more an account of how and why a certain way of viewing the world (attending to bodily autonomy) emerged at a particular place and time (late 18\textsuperscript{th} century England and France). Framed in this way, Hunt’s argument is a rather strong claim for the connection between literature and the law.

A third way to articulate the relationship between law and literature is to frame narrative itself as a mode of advancing a legal claim. This approach—which has been especially powerful within literary studies in past three decades—draws on the insights of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, which framed storytelling as both personally healing and politically efficacious. If early work in trauma studies focused more on the former,\textsuperscript{57} growing interest in human rights in the early 2000s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Subsequent Geneva Conventions have expanded the ambit of international humanitarian law to cover prisoners of war and civilians, among others. The general term Geneva Conventions refers to four distinct agreements, the last of which was negotiated in August 1949. See Geneva Conventions, August 12 1949, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf.
  \item Hunt is concerned with rights such as those enumerated in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) and the US Declaration of Independence (1776)—what have been called modern human rights, related but not identical to the contemporary human rights codified in the mid-20th century.
  \item Lynn Hunt, \emph{Inventing Human Rights: A History} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 33.
  \item See for example the foundational work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub. More recently, Ravit Reichman's \emph{The Affective Life of Law} (2009) explicitly connects trauma studies to law and literature through an examination of what she terms "legal modernism."
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began to examine narrative as both as a mode of movement-building and a way of articulating rights claims. Genres such as memoir and *testimonio* have attracted particular attention for their capacity to bridge the gap between individual experience and collective claim for redress. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith develop an influential version of this argument in their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004), which draws on a diverse range of case studies to argue that autobiographical storytelling can be a powerful mode of advancing social justice. They note, for example, the experience of elderly Korean women whose experiences of sexual slavery under Japanese occupation only became legible (to others and even to themselves) as human rights violations many decades after the fact—when the growth of feminism and life history as a genre made this “belated narrating” possible. In this and other instances, Schaffer and Smith argue for the “efficacy of storytelling” as a mode of advancing justice.

Perhaps the most vivid example of how that process might work is South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Beginning in 1994, the TRC provided a space in which citizens could speak publicly about (some of) the abuses of apartheid. The quasi-juridical structure of South Africa’s TRC meant that the public sharing of personal narratives could function both to name violations and (in some cases) to articulate a reparation claim—linking narrative and (the promise of) justice in ways that have been particularly intriguing to literary scholars. The central role the TRC accorded to narrative was particularly alluring to literary theorists, offering what Julie Peters characterizes as the chance to “break out of the realm of fictions…to make their interpretive

58 In the 1990s, for example, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was a key text through which literary attention to the *testimonio* entered the Anglophone academy.
techniques work on something closer to “reality.”” Mark Sanders and Theresa Phelps, among others, turned their analytical lens on the activity of storytelling as it took shape in the TRC context—producing insightful work that engages with not only literary objects such as novels, but with the acts of reading, writing, and storytelling as they unfold in public and/or juridical settings. Although South Africa’s TRC was not the first, its powerful role in public life has made it a key site of analysis for thinkers interested in how narrative might advance claims of rights and redress.

I will mention one final way in which law and literature might be related, and that is formally. This approach asks us to examine how the formal structures of law and narrative echo, reinforce, and/or subvert each other—expanding the scope of “law and literature” to include works that do not explicitly engage with issues of law, rights, or justice. This approach is evident, for example, in Joseph Slaughter’s argument that the structure of human rights law and the bildungsroman are “mutually ratifying”—not because themes of human rights are in any way inherent to the plot of such novels but rather because their structure corresponds to the narrative structure of the story of the rights claimant. This homology registers one of the ways in which literature contributes to the cultural normalization of law, cultivating in readers an acceptance of the “common sense” of human rights. A series of related arguments might be made in the context of other branches of international law. For example, Paul Saint-Amour has argued that Ulysses registers formally the effects of total war in a way that critiques the limitations of international humanitarian law, which, until 1977, excluded

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64 Because contemporary literary scholarship focused on Truth and Reconciliation commissions is so powerfully shaped by the South African case study, it is easy to forget that such scholarship predates 1994. See for example Barbara Harlow’s Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention (1992), which examines the 1990 Chilean TRC. Read in light of later TRC scholarship, Harlow’s analysis is notable for its focus on narrative as a mode of demanding accountability (rather than as individually or collectively therapeutic).
anticolonial struggles from protection under the laws of war. In both of these cases, what is at stake is not (or not only) a novel’s themes or plot points, but how the novel’s form responds to elements of international law.

This mode of articulating the relationship between law and literature is one that this project shares. Most of the novels I examine are not "about" sovereignty in any direct thematic sense; rather, I argue that features of these novels—certain forms of narrative, analogy, allegory, genre—alternately reaffirm or subvert corresponding features of international legal sovereignty. I find this approach especially fruitful because it helps us recognize the deep imbrication of legal norms and cultural forms. As Sophia McClennan and Joseph Slaughter write, “cultural forms are themselves regulatory: they make it possible to frame and transmit some thoughts and themes and to disable others.” As readers (and writers), that is, we do not only engage with the law when we explicitly read (or write) about it; rather, cultural forms that may seem quite unrelated to the law can nonetheless reflect, complicate, and disrupt our sense of how the law works. This type of form or genre-based analysis offers a way to uncover connections that might otherwise remain invisible, revealing how the "soft" work of culture undergirds the conceptual architecture of international legal sovereignty.

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Conceptualizing Sovereignty

Where I depart from this tradition, however, is in my central focus on sovereignty—a concept that has fluttered around the edges of literary scholarship, but rarely taken center stage. I have alluded to the fact that "sovereignty" is a complex term with several distinct meanings, many more valences, and a long history of debate. Some of the difficulty of defining sovereignty emerges from the concept's high level of abstraction; some emerges from its cultural and historical malleability; some emerges from the fact that scholars have theorized it from several distinct disciplinary positions—most notably, political theory, legal theory, international relations, and sociology. Here, I will offer a very brief account of some of the key features of sovereignty as I approach it in this dissertation.

“The modern principle of state sovereignty," international relations theorist R. B. J. Walker notes, "has emerged historically as the legal expression of the character and legitimacy of the state.” At its core, Walker argues, sovereignty expresses states’ claims to exercise “legitimate power within strictly delimited territorial bounds.” In this sense, sovereignty appears as the central principle organizing a world system composed of individual nation-states—seemingly both natural and straightforward. Yet articulating a general definition of the term is strikingly difficult. Many scholars approach sovereignty not through a single definition but through a collection of propositions that enumerate different aspects of sovereignty from different angles, as it were. For example, Raia Prokhovnik frames sovereignty through four “propositions,” which I summarize below:

1). Sovereignty means absolute power and/or authority

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69 Sovereignty has, however, been important to indigenous literary studies. See for example Imagining Sovereignty and Sovereign Selves, both by David Carlson; Sovereign Stories by Padraig Kirwan; That Dream Shall Have a Name by David Moore.


71 Walker, Inside/Outside, 165.
2). Sovereignty names the location of final and supreme authority

3). Sovereignty can be understood in terms of both legal (having law-making power) and political (having legitimate power to rule) dimensions.

4). Sovereignty has both internal and external dimensions.\(^2\)

Yet even these four propositions, as Prokhovnik acknowledges, are hardly straightforward. The first, for example, emphasizes sovereignty’s “absolute” character—yet what “absolute” denotes varies depending on whom you consult. (Bodin, Hobbes, and Kant, for instance, all use the term in distinct ways.) Similarly, Prokhovnik’s reference to power “and/or” authority gestures towards two distinct strains in theorizing about sovereignty. One tradition—most directly associated with Hobbes—equates sovereignty with supreme power. Another line of thinking, associated with Hans Kelsen and H.L.A. Hart, emphasizes political authority rather than power.\(^3\) And this is just in relation to Prokhovnik’s first proposition! Similar complexities could be uncovered for the others. As Prokhovnik herself argues, the intellectual history of sovereignty is less a “progressive refinement towards a final and fixed meaning” and more a series of repeated reconceptualizations.\(^4\) As concept and practice, sovereignty is always in flux.

For my purposes, Prokhovnik’s fourth point—the distinction between internal and external sovereignty—is key. As the terminology suggests, internal sovereignty refers to manifestations of authority within a particular territory; external sovereignty denotes the recognition of that authority by others. For example, one manifestation of internal sovereignty might be a state's capacity to regulate cross-border flows of people, ideas, goods, and capital.\(^5\) Another might be the state's


\(^3\) Walker, Inside/Outside, 165.

\(^4\) Prokhovnik, Sovereignty, 3.

capacity to crack down on rebel groups or illegitimate militias operating on its territory. (Case in point: Nigeria’s ultimately successful attempt to squelch the Biafran rebellion.) External sovereignty, in contrast, is oriented towards the outside world. In what ways, and to what extent, do other actors recognize a particular authority? The most straightforward manifestation of external sovereignty is *international legal sovereignty*, which refers to whether or not a state is recognized by other states as a fellow actor in the international system. This is the primary sense in which this dissertation engages with sovereignty; I am concerned less with manifestations of authority within Nigeria and/or Biafra and more with how Nigeria and (especially) Biafra were seen and rhetorically received on the world stage. As I have already noted, much of Biafra’s diplomacy during the war was geared towards earning recognition from established states. The recognition that it ultimately garnered—from Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania, Zambia, and Haiti—was, for this reason, a high-water mark in the would-be state’s battle for self-determination. But they were not, ultimately, enough; the vast majority of existing states sided with Nigeria in order to preserve the status quo of the existing international state system. For this reason, David Ijalaye contends, Biafra as such never constituted a state in international law.76

Focusing on external sovereignty means that recognition is central to my analysis of sovereignty. Recognition, of course, is social; it emerges not from an autonomous expression of authority but from the interaction between two entities. This project thus takes a constructivist approach to sovereignty, treating sovereignty not (only) as a fixed ideal but a process of ceaseless negotiation among a range of actors:

Attempting to realize this ideal entails a great deal of hard work on the part of statespersons, diplomats, and intellectuals: to establish and police practices consistent with the ideal…; to delegitimate and quash challenges or threats; and to paper over persistent anomalies to make

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them appear to be consistent with…a pristine Westphalian ideal.\textsuperscript{77}

Approaching sovereignty as negotiation in this way highlights the importance of language, rhetoric, and narrative, inviting us to ask questions like: What narratives have historically undergirded the legal concept of sovereignty? What sorts of discursive communities produce claims about sovereignty, and what forms have those claims taken? How do particular genres of writing—the treaty, the proclamation, the novel—enable or disable particular versions of these claims? My approach to sovereignty in this dissertation is thus to trace the shape of Biersteker and Weber’s “hard work” as it manifests rhetorically in a range of writings about the Nigeria-Biafra war.

My attention to sovereignty’s social foundations means that I prioritize its “historical and culturally specific character” over its definition as fixed principle.\textsuperscript{78} One of the curious features of the scholarship on sovereignty—in contrast, for example, to the literature on nations and nationalism—is the relative dearth of attention to the concept’s historical roots. Yet sovereignty does have deep historical roots, albeit contested ones. Most conventionally, key elements of modern sovereignty are linked to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia (thus, Westphalian sovereignty), two treaties that ended decades of religious war in central Europe. Over the last twenty years, scholars have pushed back on this “Westphalia overstatement,” locating the roots of sovereignty in many other historical encounters (both pre- and post-dating Westphalia).\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} Walker, Inside/Outside, 166.
\textsuperscript{79} Andrew MacRae, “Counterpoint: The Westphalia Overstatement,” International Social Science Review 80, no. 3/4 (2005): 159–64. One version of this critique argues that something akin to sovereignty coalesced well before the Peace of Westphalia, perhaps in the emergence of competing states in fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy; the consolidation of political unity in tenth-century England; or even in much earlier Augustinian notions of a peace encompassing Christian peoples around the globe. Taking a narrow view that focuses only on early modern Europe, we might nonetheless note that many of the key features of Westphalia also appear in the earlier Peace of Augsburg (1555), which included a religious settlement akin to that reached at Westphalia. Still others have argued that it is a mistake to read notions of sovereignty into the Peace of Westphalia at all, pointing out that nothing in the treaty itself created sovereign states. See also Matthew Hart, Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 42-47.
This dissertation examines sovereignty as a legal category that emerges from the European colonial encounter with non-European peoples. In this, I draw inspiration from the legal movement known as Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL). In brief, TWAIL affirms the importance of international law but challenges its current regime. In the 2000 piece “What is TWAIL?”, Makau Mutua frames the movement as grounded in the notion that the current framework of international law is “illegitimate” because it is “based almost entirely on the intellectual, historical, and cultural experiences of one region of the world…Europe.”80 Sovereignty itself is a particular locus of this critique; as Antony Anghie argues, sovereignty as legal concept “was constituted through colonialism.”81 This point is examined in greater detail in my first chapter; in short, Anghie argues that European legal thinkers in the late 19th century effectively defined sovereignty in terms of “civilization,” a term that, to them, self-evidently excluded African and other non-European forms of socio-political organization. If correct—and I find Anghie’s argument compelling—then sovereignty itself entered the realm of international law as a vague compound of intuition, "common sense," and Western cultural norms. This framing helps us recognize the ways in which culture is built into the ostensibly neutral legal concept from the start, prompting the question: how have cultural forms continued to shape notions of sovereignty since the consolidation of international law as a discipline in the late 19th century? While my dissertation examines this question through the particular case study of the Nigeria-Biafra war, I aim to open up sovereignty as a fruitful area of study in literary studies more broadly. This dissertation is thus grounded in a framing of sovereignty that takes seriously its historical, malleable, and constructed nature.

Structure of the Project

My first chapter argues that the colonial civilizing mission is a central framework for Biafran claims to sovereignty. I begin with a close reading of a 1966 government pamphlet that juxtaposes Biafran “civilization” and “development” with Northern Nigeria’s “savagery.” I argue that the emphasis on Biafran civilization—in contradistinction to Nigerian barbarity—is, implicitly, an argument for sovereignty couched in the colonial terms underwriting the development of international law in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I develop this argument by drawing on both legal scholarship (primarily Third World Approaches to International Law) and close readings of two novels that take African civilization and barbarism as their core thematic: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. The two are linked and famously critiqued by Chinua Achebe, whose 1977 essay “An Image of Africa” identified the racism that limits both novels’ representations of Africa. Achebe’s essay brings this chapter full circle, for Achebe himself worked in Biafra’s propaganda department, reproducing the civilization/savagery binary that he would later critique. By mapping out the early 20th century antecedents—both literary and legal—to the Biafran conflict, this chapter sets the historical and theoretical groundwork for the analysis to follow.

My second chapter examines the narrative of development as a contested framework for understanding Biafran sovereignty claims. I focus on the trope of the allegorical child, the child who stands in for the nascent state of Biafra. After using Kole Omotoso’s novel *The Combat* to articulate a theory of allegory, I then examine how allegory is used to narrate development in two novels that figure the Biafran proto-state as a child. The first is Auberon Waugh’s *A Bed of Flowers* (1971)—a strange rewriting of *As You Like It*, in which Shakespeare’s pastoral romance is threaded through with the English characters’ anxiety about what responsibility, if any, they have to starving Biafran children. The second is Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982), the story of a wealthy Nigerian
woman who joins the army and navigates a relationship with an English lover. Both novels invest hope for the future in a child named Biafra. In *A Bed of Flowers* that child lives; in *Destination Biafra* she dies. I argue that these children-as-literary-allegories-for-the-state respond formally to the wartime reporting and propaganda that featured *actual* Biafran children: the “starving Biafran child,” iconic 1960s symbol of humanitarian distress. In most international news coverage, these children came to symbolize the stillbirth of Africa's postcolonial future. Rhetorically framing Biafra-the-child as a young and growing state offers an alternative imagination of the Biafran child—one that postwar writers use to transform a trope that had, by the time of their writing, come to define the war.

In the third chapter, I track the evolution of genocide analogies in the postwar literature. My argument unfolds in two parts. In the first part of the chapter, I explore the textual identification between Biafra and the Holocaust—during and after the war—asking how these analogies articulate a relationship between genocide and self-determination. I argue that contemporary literature and journalism linked the civil war to the Holocaust, bolstering claims of Biafran sovereignty that, at their strongest, equated anything short of an independent Biafran state with genocide. Such arguments were grounded primarily in the metaphorical equation of Igbos with persecuted Jews—a comparison that predates the civil war by many centuries, but that was resurrected and repurposed to frame the Biafran conflict as the Holocaust redux. In this framing, it is precisely Igbo suffering that authorizes the imagination of a strong, protecting state: Biafra as the new Israel. The novels of the 1970s and 80s, I argue, look back to the Holocaust in order to complicate and in some cases resist the Biafran government’s attempts to rhetorically mobilize this genocide. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how these genocide analogies shift in the civil war literature of the early 21st century, as both the Holocaust and Biafra recede further into the past. I argue that more recent Biafran war literature engages not with the Holocaust but with the “ambiguous genocide” in Darfur.
In attending to recent Biafra novels as well as the classic canon, this chapter draws on Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory to show how the memory of Biafra shapes writing about more recent genocides, and vice versa.

The fourth and final chapter examines genre fiction and economic sovereignty, focusing on Frederick Forsyth’s *The Dogs of War* (1974), Eddie Iroh’s *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976), and William Boyd’s *Solo* (2014). Each of these novels narrates an account of the war that highlights the decisive role of natural resources and the military stakes of both licit and illicit trade. Though the three novels considered in this chapter take a range of views on the war, they share two fundamental commitments. One, each novel highlights the significance of non-state actors, including mercenaries and corporate interests. Two, each novel suggests that these non-state actors are in fact deeply entwined with certain elements of the state, breaking down a clear binary between state and non-state actors. Focusing on tropes such as the final plot twist, the deep-seated conspiracy, and the hero’s competitive individualism, I argue that the thriller—dependent as it is on the operations of non-state or para-state actors—makes visible for the reader the ways in which multinational corporations themselves enjoy quasi-sovereign status. If the thriller becomes the privileged genre for narrating the failure of Biafran independence, I suggest, it does so by framing that failure in terms of the expanding legal rights of antagonistic corporations.

Finally, I close with a brief coda considering the most recent Biafra novel to be published, Tochi Onyebuchi’s *War Girls* (2019). More than fifty years have passed since the war ended; how does its literature speak to us today? To answer this question, I draw out two threads of Onyebuchi’s science fiction novel that use the resources of the past to think through the future. First, I show how Onyebuchi draws a line between the notions corporate sovereignty discussed in the previous chapter and the present (and future) crisis of climate change. Second, I argue that *War Girls* critiques the normative idea of the human, questioning the capacity of human rights law to rein in state
violence. Since international human rights law was a relatively new (and attractive) framework for thinking sovereignty during the Nigeria-Biafra war, *War Girls* registers a significant shift—gesturing towards a future when that legal regime will be supplanted by more expansive ways of thinking rights, law, and justice.

The Nigeria-Biafra war took place at a moment of potentially dramatic anticolonial transformation; stories and structures that had seemed relatively stable only a decade or two prior were recognized as up for grabs and open to reinvention. The very content of self-determination was being literally rewritten in the UN General Assembly. The body of literature and journalism that this dissertation explores illuminates the transformational potential of this moment, even (perhaps especially) because the arguments for Biafran independence were often contradictory. Radical reimaginings of the world order lived side-by-side with nostalgic accounts of British imperial tutelage; Biafra was framed as both a total repudiation of Nigerian independence and its fullest expression. After the war's end, new generations of writers took up this contentious mix of justifications and ideals, remaking in fiction what seemed to have been settled on the battlefield. Attending to this ongoing conversation allows us to recognize self-determination as a concept both deeply shaped by the Biafran historical moment, and open to reinvention in our own.
Chapter 1: Civilizing Narratives

International Law and the Novel in Colonial Nigeria

"These gruesome murders and other acts of barbarism—the wanton destruction of lives and property—read like a story from the Dark Ages. But they have happened in this our twentieth century."

Pamphlet published by the Ministry of Information, Eastern Division, Nigeria, 1966

In 1966, the Nigerian Ministry of Information offices in Enugu published a brief pamphlet titled Pogrom: The Organized Massacre of Eastern Nigerians. Drafted in response to the massacres of Eastern Nigerians that had begun throughout the North earlier in the year, the pamphlet sought both to document the violence and to develop a narrative about its causes. Combining text and images, Pogrom offers an abbreviated history of the roots of the violence, a series of eyewitness accounts by both European observers and Nigerians, and an extended photographic essay that depicts the bodies of the wounded and dead. Central to the pamphlet's framing of the massacres is a juxtaposition between (Northern) savagery and (Eastern) civilization. In the foreword quoted in the epigraph above, the military governor of the Eastern Region, Lt. Col Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, positions the "barbarism" of the Northerners as a relic of the "Dark Ages," a framing that is reinforced throughout the pamphlet by frequent description of Northern society as "feudal."¹ Northern Nigerians are said to be mired in the past, "turn[ing] their backs" to "modern ideas and techniques which the Europeans had introduced."²

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² Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Information, Nigerian Pogrom, 1.
Most striking to the contemporary reader is the pamphlet's insistent reliance on the freighted rhetoric of savagery. Within the photographic essay, images have titles like "HORROR OF SAVAGERY" and, more simply, "SAVAGERY." The photo paired with the latter title depicts a man heavily bandaged around his head, jaw, and throat; the caption explains that his attackers had slashed his face "from ear to ear" with a dagger.⁵ The caption beneath another image explains that Onwuanibae Anyaegbu was "beheaded by Northern savages" while traveling by rail toward Enugu. Framing these photos is an introduction in which the author suggests that the "extremes of savagery" perpetrated by "our supposed Northern fellow-countrymen" are so horrifying as to defy description.⁴ (The writer nonetheless goes on to describe decapitation, rape, amputation, the murder of pregnant women, and killings by police officers.) Here, the rhetoric of savagery sets up the phrase "our supposed...fellow-countrymen" (emphasis mine), implying that Northerners' "savagery" disqualifies them from truly equal political status with their Eastern neighbors.

In sharp contrast to this insistence on Northern barbarity is the pamphlet's evocation of Easterners' dynamism, development, and modernity. The photographs and captions highlight the role of educated and highly skilled workers in the East: crisply dressed nurses attending to patients seated along a portico; a surgeon reattaching a severed hand; a doctor removing bullets embedded in a man's skull. Captions for these images celebrate the "skill of Eastern Nigerian surgeons" and the region's investment in "modern medicine."⁵ Even the wounded patients are figured as valuable human resources: one maimed man is described as “a skilled hydro-electric technician.”⁶ Images of x-ray machines and families disembarking from airplanes complete the picture of the East as a land of modernity and "civilization."⁷ Together, the pamphlet's imagery and text cast Eastern Nigeria as

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vibrant, forward-looking, and well equipped for the future, the antithesis of Northern "stupor" and "retardation."\(^8\) Indeed, Ojukwu's foreword opines that the East's survival will be determined not by "bullets or by savagery," but rather by "modern skills."\(^9\) The contrast with the North is unstated but, in the context of the pamphlet as a whole, impossible to miss.

This distinction between savagery and civilization—between the Dark Ages and the gleam of modern technology—is all too familiar to readers versed in colonial European writing about Africa. As historian Caspar Sylvest notes, the insistence on a gulf dividing the civilized from the barbarous is a "master trope" of late 19th and early 20th century colonial writing, evident in scientific, historical, and travel accounts as well as in fiction.\(^10\) This discourse—whether in *Nigerian Pogrom* or in earlier colonial texts—relies on what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls "the denial of coevalness," the assumption that the other is not my contemporary but somehow exists in an earlier, often premodern, past.\(^11\) The denial of coevalness is, of course, a power play—a way for the writer to assert his own authority while diminishing those about whom he writes. In his influential critique of *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe highlights precisely this temporal structure:

For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate.\(^12\)

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Achebe's assessment of the relationship between geography and temporality in *Heart of Darkness* identifies a central feature of the novella, one that has been the subject of ongoing critical debate.\(^\text{13}\) His diagnosis is particularly intriguing in the context of the *Nigerian Pogrom* pamphlet with which I began, for Achebe was an ardent supporter of Biafra and would go on to work for the very Ministry of Information that produced this and other Biafran propaganda.\(^\text{14}\) It is striking, to say the least, to see such materials mimic the move that Achebe critiques in *Heart of Darkness*—the East glancing back at the North, trapped in primordial barbarity. A paradox, then: the image of Africa that Achebe critiques in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the very image that Biafra employs to assert its right to self-determination.

As we will see later in this chapter, the rhetoric of *Nigerian Pogrom* is not a unique phenomenon. Rather, the notion that the East (and later Biafra) is the true inheritor of British civilization—and thus has advanced far beyond the sluggish North—pervades Eastern/Biafran rhetoric throughout 1966 and 1967. How are we to understand the Biafran government's frequent reiteration of such hackneyed colonial tropes? This chapter argues that the surprising persistence of this rhetoric can be understood as an implicit argument for Biafran sovereignty. As a range of legal scholarship has demonstrated, European conceptions of sovereignty consolidated in the late 19th century depended essentially on a hierarchy of civilization. In insisting that Eastern Nigeria—unlike other parts of the country—had fully incorporated the most advanced elements of British culture, the East attempted to justify its independence claims by appealing to what international law termed the standard of civilization. As this chapter will demonstrate, that standard was itself grounded in an ill-defined set of cultural intuitions. Because the content of "civilization" was rarely explicitly


articulated, the term functioned as something of an empty container, a flexible concept that was filled with content via intuition and common sense rather than any articulable criteria. This appeal to self-evidence—we all know what civilization is!—makes culture central to the concept of sovereignty that emerged through the 19th century colonial encounter.

I examine the cultural underpinning of "civilization" through two texts historically enmeshed in the origins of the Anglophone Nigerian novel, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939). Thanks in no small part to Achebe’s analysis, many readers are attuned to the ways in which Conrad’s novel imagines African savagery and civilization. Cary’s novel is less familiar to most contemporary readers and requires a bit of contextualization. *Mister Johnson* is set in colonial Nigeria in what seems to be the early 1920s and follows a spendthrift young clerk from the South working in a district office in the North. Today, Cary’s “African” novels (he wrote four set in Nigeria) are generally viewed as lesser cousins to *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India*—works marked by modernist experimentation that “depend for their symbolic message on highly essentialized, grotesque brown bodies.”

In the 1950s, however, when Cary was at the height of his career as a writer and public intellectual, his books were celebrated. Achebe recounts that *Time* magazine determined *Mister Johnson* to be “the best novel ever written about Africa” in 1952.

The novel was rather differently received by students at University College-Ibadan, where it was taught alongside Conrad in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In a retrospective essay, Achebe recalls a moment of “landmark rebellion” in which his fellow students wholly rejected *Mister Johnson’s* literary merit:

> Here was a whole class of young Nigerian students, among the brightest of their generation, united in their view of a book of English fiction in complete opposition to their English

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teacher, who was moreover backed by the authority of metropolitan critical judgment. The issue was not so much who was right as why there was that absolute divide.\textsuperscript{17}

Achebe finds in \textit{Mister Johnson} a certain “undertow of uncharitableness,” a deep-rooted antipathy towards the people and places the novel depicts.\textsuperscript{18} For example, here is Cary's description of Fada, the town in which \textit{Mister Johnson} is set:

\begin{quote}
The absolute government of jealous savages, conservative as only the savage can be, have kept it at the first frontier of civilization. Its people would not know the change if time jumped back fifty thousand years. They live like mice or rats in a palace floor; all the magnificence and variety of the arts, the ideas, the learning and the battles of civilization go on over their heads and they do not even imagine them.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

As in \textit{Heart of Darkness}, we can see here the rhetorical linkage between the denial of coevalness and the depiction of Africans as benighted savages. Achebe himself makes the connection to Conrad explicit, citing a passage in which Cary describes his Nigerian characters as “senseless and unhuman” and asking tartly whether the reader hasn’t “encountered this crowd before…in \textit{Heart of Darkness}?”\textsuperscript{20}

In grouping together \textit{Heart of Darkness} and \textit{Mister Johnson}, in other words, I take Achebe’s lead.\textsuperscript{21} But where the main force of Achebe’s argument is in showing how the two novels propagate a similarly problematic image of Africa, I focus on how these texts imagine the fragility of the British civilization against which African savagery is juxtaposed. I connect the novels’ anxious representations of civilization with ongoing debates in international law, arguing that \textit{Heart of

\textsuperscript{17} Achebe, \textit{Home and Exile}, 23. Though Achebe characterizes Cary as an “English writer,” Cary might also be read as an Irish writer; he was born in Ulster to an Anglo-Irish family of declining wealth. Though certainly not an outsider to English letters in the way that Conrad was, Cary’s literary work is arguably marked by his early experiences of dislocation and cultural liminality. For a discussion of writing on Biafra that treats Cary as an Irish writer, see Fiona Bateman, “Biafra in the Irish Imagination,” in \textit{Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War}, eds. Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (Suffolk: James Currey, 2016), 284-313.

\textsuperscript{18} Achebe, \textit{Home and Exile}, 24.


\textsuperscript{20} Achebe, \textit{Home and Exile}, 24.

Darkness and Mister Johnson make explicit the tenuousness of European "civilization" as a foundation for international legal sovereignty. In the chapter's final section, I return to an archive of Biafran propaganda to show that the emphasis on Biafran civilization (in contradistinction to Nigerian savagery) is a pervasive trope in early Biafran writing. Strikingly, this enthusiasm for civilizational rhetoric coincides with the decline of “civilization” as an explicit bar for state recognition in international society. In effect, Biafra embraces the standard of civilization at the very moment that newly independent African states are working to purge such language from UN documents—one of the many ways in which the Biafran saga fits uneasily into conventional narratives of decolonization.

Sovereignty and Civilization in Colonial West Africa

The primary literature that this dissertation considers is a body of novels reflecting directly on the experience of the Nigeria-Biafra war, a literary tradition that begins in 1969 with Victor Nwankwo's *The Road to Udima.* This chapter, however, lays the groundwork for my analysis by establishing the colonial background—both literary and legal—against which those later texts take shape. As Abdul JanMohamed writes, "we cannot adequately understand or appreciate the nature of colonial literature and the rise of the African novel until we study them within their generative ambiance." The generative ambiance for much of the writing about the Nigeria-Biafra war was, of course, the British colonization of Nigeria. Though it is common to frame the war as an internal conflict of the postcolonial era, both the causes of the war and the international context in which it played out were fundamentally shaped by the experience of colonization; the conflict began just seven years after Nigerian independence and centered on the question of how African economic and

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22 *The Road to Udima* was written and released as the war was ongoing; Nwankwo was a scriptwriter working for the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda.

political structures would (or could) be transformed in an era of formal decolonization. Writers sympathetic to Biafra portrayed Biafra's fight as an attempt to make real the promises of liberty and self-determination that, they suggested, Nigeria had failed to realize. Writers sympathetic to Nigeria portrayed Biafra as a neocolonial puppet, a dangerous attempt to weaken a powerful, populous, and resource-rich African state. Actors on all sides recognized that the very content of sovereignty was at stake: what did—what could—self-determination mean in this new era?

This chapter argues that one crucial framework for Biafran sovereignty claims was the concept of civilization, which must be understood as foundational to the legal framework of late 19th century European colonialism. As Antony Anghie has argued, the rise of positivism as the dominant paradigm for international law in this era reframed both the nature of international law itself and the status of non-European peoples in relation to it.24 In effect, this new framework recast international law as a product of the "special civilization" of Europe; instead of a universal framework applicable in some fashion to all peoples, this new framework "simply and massively asserted that only the

24 Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). It may be useful to briefly sketch the concepts of natural and positive law—ideas that are central to the legal discourse that this chapter analyzes, but perhaps unfamiliar to contemporary literary scholars. Broadly speaking, natural law theory is grounded in the idea that there is some necessary relationship between law and morality; law does not derive simply from human agreements or conventions, but rather from an outside source often identified with God or Nature. As such, it's historically been a particularly useful framework for considering relations among peoples and states who did not share the same political structures. While there are many varieties of natural law theory, universalism is a central and enduring feature. Because natural law is said to derive from a source outside of social custom or treaties, it is understood to apply equally to all peoples.

By the mid-19th century, however, natural law came be seen as insufficiently scientific, less a structure of law than a vaguely religious morality. Thinkers such as John Austin, William Hall, and John Westlake began to systematize the field of international law, working to transform the sprawling and contentious body of thought into a science—a body of knowledge based on observation of the world as it is, not abstract reasoning about how that world ought to be. Within this general trend—known as positivism or the turn to positive law—there were of course variations in emphasis. Some thinkers emphasized the role of custom in shaping international law, while others focused more heavily on written treaties. But what these writers had in common was a sense that international law derived from the choices and decisions of states. International law, in a very real sense, was made by states. Against the cosmopolitan natural law view—which took law to apply equally to all, regardless of socio-political organization, race, or religion—the positivist view emphasized the importance of (shared) custom and (contracted) treaties. International law, in short, was law between states, not law above states. For many positivist thinkers, the increased emphasis on state practice suggested the cultural specificity of international law rather than its universality. In other words, if international law was ultimately based on custom and contract—on what states actually agreed to do—the only states bound by it were those who had helped create it. In practical terms, this meant that for positivist thinkers, only the European states that had contributed to international law were understood to be bound by its strictures.
practice of European states was decisive and could create international law.”
Because only Europe had contributed to international law, the logic went, only Europe was bound by it: the world’s uncivilized "others" existed outside of these legal structures. Once these purportedly uncivilized peoples and states—including Africans—were located outside of the legal sphere, the task of the European positivist thinkers was to articulate the mode by which they might enter into international society and the realm of international law. Positivist international law thus functioned as a kind of "mediating ideology," enabling European states to preserve their own dominance while projecting a set of standards—ostensibly derived from universal values—that non-European societies must meet in order to be recognized as full members of international society. Because these standards were crafted in the image of European culture, attaining recognition as a sovereign state meant remaking oneself in the image of that (foreign) culture. In short, this reinvention of the legal framework for colonialism provided a rationale by which non-European societies could be cast out of the realm of international law and then re-absorbed into that realm "on terms which completely subordinated and disempowered" them.

The new framework was structured by a core distinction between the "civilized" world—which had created, and thus was bound by, international law—and the rest of the world, which fell partially or completely outside the law’s remit. A usefully vague term, "civilization" was often left undefined; it named a cluster of attributes that were often assumed to be self-evident to the

28 From this perspective, attaining sovereignty was a profoundly ambivalent development for African states, relying as it did on the adoption of external cultural and political practices. As we will see, Biafra's attempt to lay claim to sovereign status by virtue of its British colonial tutelage provoked significant internal conflict, ultimately prompting a search for other frameworks within which to articulate sovereign status.
international lawyers who deployed it. Where "civilization" was defined, its meaning was contested
and often confused: varying thinkers stressed the importance of perceived economic, political, racial,
thetical, social, and moral distinctions among peoples. Despite the lack of consensus on where
to draw a line between civilized and uncivilized, the fundamental distinction found "extraordinarily
widespread acceptance" in Victorian culture. As Anghie writes,

All non-European societies, regardless of whether they were regarded as completely
primitive or relatively advanced, were outside the sphere of law, and European society
provided the model which all societies had to follow if they were to progress. Only by "progressing"
towards European cultural norms would these ostensibly uncivilized societies
be able to enter into international society, gaining recognition and the promise of sovereign
equality.

The reliance on a standard of civilization was articulated explicitly in many of the most
canonical international law treatises of the era. Consider, for example, the explicit recourse to
civilization in the work of John Westlake, one of the most eminent British legal thinkers of the late
19th century. Westlake was an MP turned international law professor who served as president of the
Institute of International Law in the 1890s; he had also co-founded the Revue de Droit International

31 Duncan Bell, “Introduction” in Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought, ed. Duncan Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 1-25, 10. Some scholars posited intermediate categories between “civilized” and “uncivilized”—as, for instance, in Robert Phillimore’s 1879 division of the world into three categories: barbarous states, civilized states, and Christian states (the Christian states being a more advanced subset of the civilized states). Other scholars, drawing on Montesquieu, distinguished between "savages" and "barbarians"—the former understood to be nomadic hunters with essentially no governmental structures, the latter thought to be more settled and able to form at least rudimentary states. Still others allowed for the possibility that states might move among different categories (Turkey and Japan were prime contenders).
33 Anghie, Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law, 62.
34 This notion of a “bar” that non-European societies must meet is known as the standard of civilization. For a detailed account of its history and continuing relevance, see Gerrit W. Gong, The Standard of Civilization in International Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
two decades earlier. His writings exemplify the distinction between civilized Europeans and uncivilized others that explicitly grounds much of international legal theory in this time period. In his 1894 *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, Westlake argues that an “uncivilized population” has no legal rights that “make its free consent necessary to the establishment over it of a government possessing international validity.” This argument took little notice of actual state practice, which relied heavily on treaties grounded in (ostensibly if not actually) "free consent." Westlake, in contrast, asserts that “uncivilized” peoples cannot lawfully transfer sovereignty because they do not possess it in the first place:

> A stream cannot rise higher than its source, and the right to establish the full system of civilized government, which in these cases is the essence of sovereignty, cannot be based on the consent of those who at the utmost know but a few of the needs which such a government is intended to meet.\[36\]

Instead of deriving sovereignty from agreements or treaties, Westlake contends that non-European states achieve sovereignty by creating “conditions recognized by the civilized world”—particular social, political, and economic structures.\[37\] From this perspective, colonization offers a path towards recognition in international law: a means by which uncivilized regions of the world may move towards civilization and its corollary, sovereignty.

This entire framework made little attempt to account for the long-standing practice of treaty-making between European and non-European peoples, a practice that depended on at least some


\[36\] Westlake, *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, 144.

\[37\] Westlake, *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, 145.
elementary sense of a shared legal world.\(^{38}\) Indeed, treaties were foundational to the British colonization of the area that would become Nigeria. Beginning in the mid-19th century, treaties between indigenous leaders and representatives of British trading companies enabled the British government to develop a sphere of influence over territories along the Niger and Benue rivers. This arrangement aimed to curtail French and German expansionism without taking on the expensive and complex administrative work that full annexation would entail.\(^ {39}\) In the 1880s and 1890s, the Royal Niger Company (and its predecessor, the National Africa Company) concluded over three hundred such treaties with local rulers,\(^ {40}\) drawing on templates with standard verbiage.\(^ {41}\) Each of these templates included language in which signatories pledged to cede "the whole of our territory...for ever" to either the National African Company (1882-1886) or the Royal Niger Company (after 1886).\(^ {42}\) Most also granted the company rights to land, to settle disputes, to exclude foreign settlers, and, sometimes, to tax and mine. As John Flint notes in his magisterial study of the Royal Niger Company, these treaties ultimately gave the company "powers which were so extensive as to transcend the sphere of purely commercial activity."\(^ {43}\) Given the clauses that referred to the cession of entire territories, it could be argued, Flint suggests, "that the company now possessed full sovereignty."\(^ {44}\) Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui refers to charter companies of this sort as "quasi-


\(^{40}\) Sir E. Hertslet, *The Map of Africa by Treaty* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1894), 154. See 131-6 for a list of these treaties.

\(^{41}\) Hertslet, *The Map of Africa by Treaty*. See 136-153 for the text of each template and tables delineating which treaties were based on which templates.


sovereigns," a term that usefully suggests both the company's power and the flexible, ad hoc nature of its authority.\footnote{Grovgoui, \textit{Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans}, 69.}

This practice of treaty-making posed intellectual challenges for the rising positivist argument that non-European states were outside the realm of law altogether; if indigenous African rulers lacked sovereignty altogether, by what logic could they transfer it to outsiders? This fundamental tension was never fully resolved. Instead, the new focus on civilizing the uncivilized in order to usher them into the family of nations "recast entirely the legal basis of relations between the civilized and uncivilized by framing the project as though the colonial encounter was about to occur, as opposed to already having taken place."\footnote{Anghie, \textit{Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law}, 66.} Theory and practice did not necessarily line up; much of the colonization of Africa during this period took place in an ad hoc and chaotic manner, as different states and companies interpreted the validity of treaties or claims of occupation through the lens of their own economic and political interests.

These competing rationales were on full display at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which attempted to articulate a framework for relations among competing colonial powers in Africa (particularly along the Congo and Niger rivers). Broadly speaking, the Conference marked the beginning of a new era in European colonization characterized by a move away from charter company administration and towards more direct modes of colonial control.\footnote{The British Crown would revoke the Royal Niger Company's charter somewhat later, in 1899.} Delegates from the major European powers arrived in Berlin in the winter of 1884; as U. O. Umozurike notes, Africans themselves were "neither consulted nor apprised of the conference."\footnote{U. O. Umozurike, \textit{International Law and Colonialism in Africa} (Enugu: Nwamife Publishers, 1979), 26.} By early 1885, the representatives had agreed to a set of principles articulated in the General Act of the Berlin Conference. In addition to framing a set of agreements about river navigation, free trade, and
coastal settlement, the General Act articulated an expansive justification for the colonial project writ large. As the Preamble stated, the ultimate end of colonization was to be “the development of trade and civilization in certain regions in Africa.” Article Six elaborated this idea of civilization, enumerating the various ways in which European colonizers would promote the civilization of African peoples: by “suppressing slavery,” supporting charitable and religious institutions, and “instructing the natives.” Collectively, these activities would foster for indigenous Africans “the blessings of civilization.” Such language was representative of a larger rhetorical shift from "the vulgar language of profit to that of order, proper governance, and humanitarianism." In this new (rhetorical) dispensation, commerce was linked to the progress of civilization. Thus the General Act's emphasis on the civilizing mission was not a repudiation of economic interests so much as an attempt to integrate those interests with an account of how trade itself would serve to develop native societies. As Geoffroy de Courcel wrote in the early 20th century, the European powers' self-described project at Berlin was "not only to exploit, but to civilize; two inseparable missions." This synthesis would find its fullest expression a few decades later in Frederick Lugard's "dual mandate."

In short, the late 19th century saw the articulation of "a new ideological basis" for the expansion of European empires in Africa, one grounded in the distinction between uncivilized Africans (who lacked sovereignty) and European states whose legal authority was grounded in what William Hall, in his 1884 Treatise on International Law called "the special civilization of modern

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52 Anghie, Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law, 69.
54 Frederick Lugard, The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), 58. The dual mandate was Lugard’s articulation of the British empire’s twin “moral obligations to the subject races” and “material obligations” to “develop…natural resources for the mutual benefit of the people and of mankind in general.”
Europe. One key effect of this shift was to link a legal status (sovereignty) to a "cultural distinction." Recognizing sovereignty as an attribute that is culturally constructed, in turn, helps us see how areas of thought that are not obviously juridical—literature, art, anthropology—can profoundly shape understandings of who is sovereign and what that sovereignty entails. Numerous scholars have explicated the way in which discourses such as colonial travel writing have transformed cultural and historical variation into essentialized difference and racialized inferiority. As Valentin-Yves Mudimbe argues, knowledge about Africa—whether anthropological, historical, or, in this case, literary—is always produced within, and marked by, the unequal relationship between Africa and Europe. Thus colonial texts "speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent by naming its 'primitiveness.'" The novels I examine in this chapter, *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson*, both emerge from this colonial context and are structured in fundamental ways around the civilized-uncivilized binary. This is not a distinctive features of these two novels, of course; as Achebe notes in his essay on the former, there are "whole libraries of books" that recapitulate similar binaries: Christian/heathen, advanced/primitive, darkness/light, and so forth. Yet the particular status that both Conrad and Cary enjoyed in mid-20th century British culture has given them an outsize impact on the invention of Africa in the Western imagination; by virtue of their aesthetic status they speak, as it were, from a larger pulpit. In the next part of this chapter, I examine how these novels draw on the civilized-uncivilized binary to make visible the contradictions and indeed the fragility of Europe's vaunted civilization.

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56 William Edward Hall, *A Treatise on International Law* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890), 40. Hall explained: "international law is a product of the special civilization of modern Europe, and is intended to reflect the essential facts of that civilization." This law, he went on, "cannot be supposed to be understood or recognised" by other countries.


Conradian Kinship and the Ambivalences of International Law

From one perspective, *Heart of Darkness* could be read as reinscribing the narrative of development so central to the civilizing mission. As countless other critics have observed, Conrad locates his European figures in modernity and his Africans in some long-ago “night of first ages.” Implicit in this temporal gap is the possibility of bridging it, the possibility that Africa might yet find its way to civilization: here too, England offers a template. In the novella's familiar opening, Marlow gazes out across the Thames and muses that “this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth.” Recalling the long-ago days of Roman imperial rule, he imagines Britain then as a land of “savagery, utter savagery,” a place no Roman administrator would wish to be posted, far from the comforts of good food and comfortable lodging: “precious little fit for a civilized man.” From this inauspicious wilderness, the reader is to understand, Britain has developed into a thriving commercial hub peopled by accountants, directors, and lawyers. This narrative of development, telegraphed in the very first scene, seems to affirm the liberal progress narrative in which positivist international law is grounded. England has already developed from barbarism into civilization; Africa, in time, will follow.

Even as Marlow sketches this story, however, he acknowledges that England's apparently steady present is merely "flash of lightning," soon to be subsumed again in darkness. Civilization is a brittle, fragile thing, liable to collapse back into barbarism at any moment. The threat of this collapse is most vividly suggested in the figure of Kurtz, whose station is meant to be not only a trading hub but “a centre...for humanizing, improving, instructing”—the gerunds emphasizing the

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65 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 68.
sense of progressive action. This civilizing mission is also reflected in Kurtz’s side project: writing a report on behalf of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Indeed, the draft report that Marlow finds is structured around a familiar story of development:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc.

On the final page of this document, of course, is the infamous line: “exterminate all the brutes”—and just a few pages later, Marlow discovers the "savage sight" of Kurtz's grisly trophies. For Marlow at least, Kurtz represents both the zenith of civilization and its nadir: two states rendered as unnervingly coeval in this man who represents “all Europe.” In Kurtz, we have a story not of development and not even (or not wholly) of devolution, but of the co-presence of civilization and savagery. This collapse is made most symbolically in the novella's final pages, when it is the Thames rather than the Congo that “seem[s] to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.” The river of civilization and commerce and the river of inscrutable savagery are, in the novella’s final sentence, one and the same.

Here we come to the crux of the matter, for Conrad's central anxiety in Heart of Darkness is, of course, not difference but kinship. How clear, really, is the divide between the still, serene Thames—that placid "River Emeritus"—and the dark banks of the Congo? The novel's depiction of European imperialism as a project of “brute force…robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” suggests that Europeans share the “violent” impulses of those Marlow terms

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66 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 104.
68 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 128.
69 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 127.
70 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 164.
“savages.” Indeed, Marlow articulates this sense of connection (in)famously as a dim and anxious suspicion “of their not being inhuman:"

It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you, was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.73

Marlow's equivocal identification with the African "other" points to the paradoxical nature of the civilizing mission, which depends on difference yet ostensibly strives to overcome that difference. Without a clear sense of distinction between uncivilized and the civilized, the premise of the civilizing mission is incoherent. Yet to the degree that that distinction erodes—to the degree that the project is successful—it destabilizes the whole edifice of colonial rule. A similar paradox structures the legal framework discussed in the previous section. The standard of civilization is premised on the notion of a gap between international society (the civilized European states) and the rest of the world (outside of the family of nations and beyond the remit of law); yet the positivists also imagined the future expansion of international society through the gradual entry of new states that had—perhaps through colonization—attained the requisite level of civilization.74 The gradual expansion of positive law would then ultimately lead to a future in which international law would be fully developed, universal, and binding.

In suggesting this slippage between the Thames and the Congo, that is, Heart of Darkness articulates an anxiety central to the legal grounding of civilizing mission: the fascination and

72 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 69-70.
73 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 108.
74 The term “development” thus has a double valence in the early days of international law: it refers to the development of the uncivilized into civilization (and thus, into sovereignty), and also to the development of international law per se (understood as the extension of international law to more and more states and societies). Because of the way in which sovereignty was premised on civilization, the latter development depends on the former.
revulsion of that remote yet undeniable "kinship." For while many of the legal texts of this era insisted on the "unthinkability" of any correspondence between European and non-European societies, the expectation of an expanding circle of civilization meant that such correspondence could never be wholly disavowed.75 This foundational tension is evident in the preface to Westlake's *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, which lauds the study of societies "remote from our own."76 "We learn from them, he continues, "how the different peoples whom we study usually conducted themselves with regard to family, property, or any other matter which in our actual England is regulated by law."77 As Anghie notes, the use of the phrase "our actual England" here is striking, a kind of nervous tic that works to suppress the idea that there might be "some other England which compares with the savage societies which Westlake is intent on separating from England."78 Westlake continues:

...by accumulating a number of such investigations we learn how what we now know as the law of a country has arisen. But the analytical school are certainly right in maintaining that, if we give the name of law to anything which we so discover in a remote state of society before we have fixed in our minds what we mean by that name, we beg the question, and have no security that our language has any consistent, or therefore useful, sense.79

In effect, Westlake here addresses the destabilizing possibility that some custom of a "remote" society might seem to merit "the name of law"—a possibility that he shuts down in the very same sentence by declaring that the meaning of law must be "fixed in our minds" *before* any examination of non-European societies is undertaken. This approach certainly produces a consistent definition of the law, but it also ensures that any law outside of Europe can only ever be understood as a deformed or imperfect version of the European original. The entire digression, moreover, suggests

76 Westlake, *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, viii.
77 Westlake, *Chapters on the Principles of International Law*, viii.
an awareness that the sharp delineation between "remote" societies and "our actual England" is not quite so secure as Westlake might wish.

This moment of tension in Westlake's treatise is emblematic of a larger contradiction in the positivist attempt to exclude the uncivilized from the realm of international law. This contradiction goes to the heart of the discipline's attempt to establish its legitimacy in the face of the objection that international law is not authorized by an overarching international sovereign—"a determinate author"—and thus lacks the status of law, properly considered. To address this concern, famously articulated by John Austin and Jeremy Bentham, historically minded-thinkers such as Sir Henry Maine argued that many societies in other ages had defined law in a range of different ways: in effect, the emphasis on an authorizing sovereign was just one approach among many. "The farther we penetrate into the primitive history of thought," Maine writes, "the farther we find ourselves from a conception of law that at all resembles a compound of the elements Bentham has mentioned." Essentially, this historical approach turned to the "primitive"—located here in other times rather than other places—in order to argue that international law was, in fact, a legitimate form of law. As Anghie writes:

From this perspective, there is an identity between primitive societies and international law; and it is by asserting the validity of primitive societies governed by custom, the principal source of international law, that international law is established as a scientific discipline. Having been so established, however, international law then emphatically disassociates from the primitive by becoming the authoritative, master discipline which identifies, places, and expels the primitive. The implications of the disconcerting identity between the international and the primitive is not explored.

80 John Austin, The Province of Jurisprudence Determined: Being the First Part of a Series of Lectures on Jurisprudence, or, the Philosophy of Positive Law, Second ed (London: J. Murray, 1861), 120.
82 Anghie, Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law, 62.
The tensions inherent in this uneasy relationship are brought to the surface in Conrad's novella, which explicitly articulates the anxiety of "kinship" that is latent in Westlake's treatise and indeed in the structure of positivist international law more broadly. In foregrounding this uncanny "kinship" between the civilized and uncivilized, *Heart of Darkness* is symptomatic of the ambivalence built into this new legal framework for colonization. (Kinship, after all, is the governing metaphor of the "family of nations.") In short, attending to the central tension of Conrad's novella allows us to recognize a subtler corresponding tension in the legal framework governing sovereignty in this period.

This reading of the relationship between *Heart of Darkness* and international law highlights the latter's internal ambivalence in a way that is not otherwise visible in the novella. Conrad's direct references to the law would seem to suggest that the Congo is a lawless land—a place where, someday, the law might arrive to rein in the most egregious abuses. The terrain that Marlow traverses is described in terms of law that is "outraged," "farcical," or identifiable only in its absence: "unlawful." This framing casts the law as a potential remedy for the abuses the novella so forcefully depicts; the problem, in this account, is the law's absence or transgression. Yet the aspects of the novel I have been discussing—aspects that do not explicitly name the law at all—suggest an alternate way to read the law's role in the Belgian Congo. On this reading, the novella's central tension—its profound desire to shut down any hint of kinship between European and African—is symptomatic of positivist international law's ambivalent relationship to the "primitive" or "uncivilized." From this perspective, *Heart of Darkness* unwittingly draws the reader's attention to what Anghie calls the "unresolvable complications" of the positivist attempt to articulate a cogent

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83 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 81, 115, 149.
legal framework for colonialism: the conflict that remains latent in the law becomes one of the
novella's most visible and enduring themes.  

"Civilization's In a Bad Way": Late Imperial Anxiety in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*

*Heart of Darkness* famously juxtaposes the horror of the Belgian Congo with what Marlow
calls the “real work” of British colonial administration, marked out in red on the post-Scramble map
of Africa. Conrads novel invokes those red patches only in passing; it is enough, presumably, to
intimate that the work of British colonization there offers an alternative to the “rapacious, pitiless
folly” of the Congo. The second novel that this chapter considers—Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*—is
set in one of those red patches: a small, dusty district in Northern Nigeria in (what seems to be) the
early 1920s. Like so much colonial writing of this era, *Mister Johnson* is fundamentally oriented around
the civilizing mission and deeply invested in the categories of civilization and savagery. Yet *Mister
Johnson*, like *Heart of Darkness*, depicts the hollowness of British "civilization," suggesting that a close
examination of those red patches might reveal quite as much folly as the Congo. Cary's image of
Africa is certainly less lurid than Conrad's—less inscrutable silence, less seething frenzy. Its horror
consists rather in the blundering destruction wrecked by the large and senseless machine that is the
colonial administration. Cary's novel is also, I will suggest, deeply rooted in the specific
administrative context of Northern Nigeria's indirect rule, and, in its post-Amalgamation setting,
attentive to what Jennifer Wenzel calls the "incommensurability of northern and southern
Nigeria." Yet at the broadest level, I read Cary's novel as fundamentally Conradian, structured

86 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 82.
ultimately around the fear that the distinction between "savage" Africans and "civilized" colonial administrators is always liable to slippage. As cultural objects, that is, both novels reveal the deep fragility of the notion of 'civilization' on which both legal and moral justifications for colonization rested.

*Mister Johnson* draws on Cary's own experiences as a colonial administrator in the Northern Nigerian Political Service, which spanned from 1913 to 1920. By this time, the British Crown exerted substantial direct control over what had become a unified protectorate in 1914 with the "amalgamation" of the North and South.88 Despite formal integration, the two regions continued to be governed quite differently. Although British administrators ostensibly relied on indirect rule in both cases, their modes of governance meshed more easily with pre-existing structures in the North than in the South. In the North, the British largely co-opted the administrative superstructure of the Sokoto Caliphate. In much of the South, political authority was more dispersed and regionally variable; as a result, British colonial administrators reshaped political institutions by creating new and contested authorities such as the "warrant chiefs."89 Christian missionaries were permitted in the South but not the North, which contributed to a religious divide between the two regions as well as significant differences in forms of education and levels of English literacy.

88 Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 98-106. This development was the culmination of a decades-long shift from charter company to British administrative control. The area around Calabar had been declared the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885; over the next decade the British would conquer the neighboring kingdom of Benin and give the expanded territory a new name: Niger Coast Protectorate. In 1906, this protectorate was joined with the colony of Lagos to form the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Throughout these years, the UK was also moving to exert more direct control over areas along the Niger and Benue that had previously been administered through the Royal Niger Company; the Company's charter had been revoked December 1899. The next ten years saw the British government turn away from diplomacy and treaty-making and towards outright conquest of the areas it nominally controlled, defeating the Sokoto Caliphate in the North and the Anioma communal defense network known as Ekumeku in the southeast. By 1910, the colonial administration had largely quashed this resistance, though it would rise periodically over subsequent decades.

Cary entered the Northern service in his mid-20s, with little relevant training, and spent several years fighting in German Cameroon during WWI. In 1917, he settled into a position as district officer in Borgu, a remote area of twelve thousand square miles which, in Cary’s later recollection, had no telegraph office, a small staff, and a history of rebellion. Initially, Cary embraced the goals of indirect rule, which he articulated in a 1919 letter:

Roughly our duty is this—to encourage and assist the people to develop on their own natural lines—necessarily a slow process, but the only sound one. We endeavour to preserve their own laws, government, and customs—not that is to keep them exactly in one place—but to let them grow naturally. We interfere as little as we can—suppressing only such things as slavery, child murder, cruel punishments and extortion.

Later, he would come to believe that indirect rule’s indifference to health and education projects was a fatal liability; in political essays from the early 1940s, he strongly advocates for social development as a key element of colonial rule. This shift was produced partly by own disenchantment with administration in Borgu; as JanMohamed notes, his letters from 1917-1919 attest to his growing frustration with what he perceived as an inefficient and fundamentally directionless colonial bureaucracy.

This is not to say that *Mister Johnson* is an anti-imperialist novel—certainly it has none of the angry zeal that Conrad levels at Belgian abuses—but that it reflects the growing sentiment, in the late 1930s, that the sun might finally be setting on the British Empire. As early as 1919, while still working in Borgu, Cary wrote the following letter recounting his reflections on a road-building project:

I thought as I walked along...this is as some Roman engineer felt when he strolled down the long reaches of Watling Street, and wondered how long he would be permitted to foretell

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the future of Britain—with one eye on the disturbances of Rome. Shall we all be recalled by the breaking of the Empire. And shall some Blackman in the year 4,000 trace my road for a paper in the Kaima Archeological Society, and debate learnedly the ancient greatness of Britain. It is certain. Nothing endures forever. England will become little England again and Nigeria an Empire of the blacks... 

I read this letter as an elegiac twist on the opening meditation in Heart of Darkness, in which Marlow famously imagines a long-ago Roman commander surveying the British wilderness. The narrators of both passages are alert to the rise and fall of empire, acknowledging that Britain's global supremacy—like Roman supremacy before it—must some day pass away. Yet the two writers situate themselves quite differently in relation to these extended time scales. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Marlow's meditation rests comfortably in the past, entranced by the Roman confrontation with British "darkness" and "savagery." And though he acknowledges that imperial supremacy is always fleeting—"a flash of lighting"—Marlow does not linger with the end of Roman (or British) power; rather, his imaginary Roman looks forward confidently to promotion and a return to civilized Ravenna. Cary's Roman, in contrast, sees all too clearly the constraints on his power. He knows that the era of Roman supremacy is waning and that he will not much longer "be permitted" to occupy this foreign land. That elegiac tone carries forward into Cary's reflection on his own work in Borgu—a great labor that, he acknowledges ruefully, will one day be a historical footnote. Indeed, the force of Cary's letter is concentrated in the capacity to imagine a future in which "the ancient greatness of Britain" matters only in the context of archeological scholarship. Here, we have come a long way from Conrad's casual confidence in the "real work" of British administration.

95 Quoted in Mahood, Joyce Cary's Africa, 56. The letter is dated October 4, 1919 and is addressed to Cary's wife.
96 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 68.
97 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 69.
99 Quoted in Mahood, Joyce Cary's Africa, 56.
100 Quoted in Mahood, Joyce Cary's Africa, 56.
101 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 74.
Joyce Cary left Nigeria in 1920 to pursue life as a writer in England. His first four novels—all set in Nigeria—were published throughout the 1930s: *Aissa Saved* (1932), *An American Visitor* (1933), *The African Witch* (1936), and *Mister Johnson* (1939).\(^{102}\) *Mister Johnson* is the last and best regarded of these "African novels," none of which sold particularly well; Cary's subsequent novels are all set in England and Ireland. (Cary would return to writing about West Africa in nonfiction essays in the 1940s and 50s.) A novel of bureaucracy and colonial boredom, *Mister Johnson* follows the eponymous protagonist, a Southern teenager, as he attempts to build a life for himself as a clerk at a colonial office in the small (Northern) town of Fada. Cary's Johnson is garrulous, generous, lazy, inventive, and passionately devoted to both British civilization in the abstract and to its particular incarnation in the form of Assistant District Officer Rudbeck, his boss. It remains unclear to the reader why Rudbeck should inspire such passionate loyalty: he is callow, unimaginative, and, like Johnson, rather lazy. The only work that catches Rudbeck's imagination is road-building, an obsession that he has inherited from a former mentor. Eager to help forward the progress of civilization, Johnson throws himself into Rudbeck's road-building scheme. That zeal is his undoing: to finance the project, the clerk relies on financial chicanery that, while not exactly theft, does not go over well with Rudbeck's superiors. Johnson is ultimately sentenced to death and requests, in a supremely disturbing scene, that Rudbeck himself execute him. Rudbeck agrees, and the novel ends with Johnson's death.

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\(^{102}\) The time between 1917, when Cary first arrived in Nigeria, and 1939, when he published *Mister Johnson*, marked a dramatic shift in Nigeria's politics. At the time that Cary worked in Borgu, Nigeria was just a few years post-Amalgamation, and there was little sense of national cohesion or nationalist organizing. However, the 1920s and 30s were a time of gradual, significant change. The 1922 Clifford Constitution took a small but symbolic step towards self-governance by setting up a new Legislative Council with a small number of elective seats; without ceding real power, the shift nonetheless sparked significant political organizing (especially in Lagos). Campaigning by youth, union, regional, and nascent nationalist groups deepened and spread; of particular significance were Herbert Macaulay's Nigerian National Democratic Party, and later, the Nigerian Youth Movement, the latter of which moved beyond its Lagosian beginnings to become Nigeria's first pan-ethnic nationalist movement in the late 1930s. A decade earlier, British administrators had merged the education and police departments of the North and South, another step in the ongoing project of forging 'one Nigeria.' However, this step did little but paper over the deep divide between North and South, which would continue to deepen with the development of ethnic-regional political parties in the 1940s. See Richard Bourne, *Nigeria: A New History of a Turbulent Century* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 34-40.
Right up to the very end, Johnson remains enchanted with the notion of "civilization"—a term that he has picked up from his education in a Southern mission school, but that has little real content for him. My reading of Mister Johnson's engagement with civilization focuses on two elements: one familial and one infrastructural. Johnson seeks, on the one hand, to reform his wife Bamu, transforming her from a "savage girl" into a "civilized lady"—provoking a marital comedy of errors that underscores the superficiality of Johnson's ideas. At the same time, the novel's treatment of Rudbeck's road-building mania suggests that the district officer's notion of civilization is every bit as tenuous as Johnson's. Indeed, the profound similarities between Johnson and Rudbeck suggest not that the former has been effectively "civilized" by his exposure to Christian missionary education, but rather that the notion of civilization itself is empty window-dressing to colonizers and colonized alike. So while JanMohamed frames Mister Johnson as an "ideological justification of the status quo," I read the novel more as a document of late-colonial exhaustion and anxiety—not a justification of the way British colonization works, but tired accounting of all the ways it doesn't.

The absurdity of the civilizing mission appears early in the novel, through Cary's account of Johnson's hapless, hopeless relationship to his wife Bamu. Johnson meets Bamu by chance at the novel's start and decides that she would make a lovely wife, provided that she relinquish her uncivilized habits and accept his enthusiasm for all things British. When he visits Bamu's family to discuss the marriage, he dons his English shoes and a white pith helmet, and "advances with the dignified steps of a governor-general in full uniform." Bamu's family, naturally, finds his getup absurd. (In a testament to the novel's consistent attention to the North-South divide, they repeatedly remind themselves that Johnson is a "foreigner" from the South and thus liable to all sorts of

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103 Cary, Mister Johnson, 2.
104 JanMohamed, Manichean Aesthetics, 11.
105 Cary, Mister Johnson, 23.
strange habits.) In the course of bargaining for Bamu's hand, Johnson trades away his hat, his shoes, his wrist-watch, his clothing, and his umbrella—finally heading home in nothing but a loincloth, feeling rather pleased with the deal he's struck. Their marriage proceeds in much the same vein: Johnson struggles to civilize his wife while Bamu hopes that this "mad stranger" will leave her be.\textsuperscript{106} Johnson insists on a Christian wedding; Bamu prefers "the usual ceremony."\textsuperscript{107} Johnson wants English cuisine; Bamu prepares what he refers to as "savage food."\textsuperscript{108} Johnson insists that his wife sit with him at the table as he eats; she finds the proposition "indecent."\textsuperscript{109} Johnson orders new clothes for her, a frilly and pink-polka dotted dress with matching underwear; Bamu wonders at such absurdities, pointing out that she has her own formal clothing, "quite new."\textsuperscript{110} Johnson, exhausted by the travails of his new marriage, finally throws up his hands: "what can you do with such savage people"?\textsuperscript{111}

Johnson's insistence on "civilizing" his wife is one of the novel's running conceits: Bamu is not threatened so much as irritated by her husband's bizarre proclivities, and the marital spats over civilized behavior provide regular comic set pieces throughout the novel. The humor of these scenes relies on a conventional distinction between the ridiculous, mission-education upstart and his steady traditional wife. As Christopher Fyfe has observed, Bamu is presented in these scenes as the "beautiful, athletic...girl from the bush, [with] all the dignity of a traditional upbringing."\textsuperscript{112} (I would add, too, that Bamu is depicted as practical and reasonable where Johnson succumbs constantly to wild flights of imagination.) For his part, Johnson is an emperor without clothes. His notion of civilization is all air and gossamer: a "compound of romantic sentiment and embroidered

\textsuperscript{106} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 4.
\textsuperscript{107} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 34.
\textsuperscript{108} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 39.
\textsuperscript{109} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 39.
\textsuperscript{110} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 37.
\textsuperscript{111} Cary, \textit{Mister Johnson}, 39.
\textsuperscript{112} Christopher Fyfe, "The Colonial Situation in \textit{Mister Johnson}," \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 9, no. 3 (1963): 226–30, 228.
underclothes," derived from advertising, his missionary education, and "a few novels approved by the SPCK."¹¹³ No character in the novel—not Bamu, not District Officer Rudbeck, not Johnson's Southern friend Benjamin—truly thinks Johnson is civilized. Nor, of course, does the implied reader. As JanMohamed writes:

> Cary is able to portray the hysterical, hyperemotional, and absurd Johnson as the complete antithesis of the typically controlled, calm, and dignified Englishman; the ridiculousness of Johnson's behavior is directly dependent upon the tacit agreement between author and reader that civilized people conduct themselves in a manner diametrically opposed to that of Johnson.¹¹⁴

Indeed, in these early scenes with his wife, Johnson reads very much as Conrad's "improved specimen," the native whom a few months of colonial education has transformed into a wholly absurd creature.¹¹⁵ As Achebe has observed, Conrad's novel is intent on things remaining "in their place;" better the cannibal along the Congo than this half-civilized absurdity puzzling out the metaphysics of the boiler.¹¹⁶ With his pith helmet and adoring verses about King George V, Cary's Mister Johnson is certainly out of place in this sense—contrasted unflatteringly with his noble, uncivilized wife. Johnson is also out of place in a more literal sense, however: he is a Southerner whose "civilizing" ways are the direct result of his mission education and exposure to Christian literary societies like the SPCK. Far from home in Fada, his dress and habits baffle the Nigerians who are his ostensible countrymen. No wonder Bamu continues to insist that Johnson is a "stranger" who "doesn't understand this country."¹¹⁷

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His wife constitutes one of Johnson's two civilizing missions: the other is the building of a road connecting Fada to towns further north. The road is Assistant District Officer Rudbeck's pet project; he has caught, from a former boss, the notion that "to build a road, any road anywhere, is the noblest work a man can do." Johnson, in turn, has caught this notion from Rudbeck—and pursues it, throughout the novel, with more focus and imagination than Rudbeck himself. For both Rudbeck and Johnson, the road symbolizes civilization. Neither man, however, can articulate exactly what that civilization entails. When Johnson tries to explain the road's value to Waziri, advisor to the powerful Emir of the region, he is startled to learn that the Emir disapproves of the road. Attempting to rebut these criticisms, Johnson reverts to a familiar dichotomy: "The Emir is an old savage fool," he cries, a man who cannot understand "civilized things" like roads. Johnson insists that the road will bring trade and wealth into Fada; Waziri demurs. Johnson, unfazed, leans ever harder on the road's civilizing influence:

Johnson laughs at this pessimism. "You are not civilized, Waziri. You don't understand that people must have roads for motors."
"Why, lord Johnson?"
"Because it is civilized. Soon everyone will be civilized."
"Why so, lord Johnson?"
"Of course, they must be—they like to be," Johnson says. "You will see how they like it. All men like to be civilized."

Johnson invokes the word "civilized" six times in the course of an increasingly circular conversation: The road must be built because it is civilized, and Fada must be civilized. When Waziri asks why everyone will become civilized, Johnson evades the question by asserting that "they like to be." But Waziri, evidently, does not like to be—nor does the Emir, nor Bamu. Johnson's frustrated

118 Cary, *Mister Johnson*, 43
119 Cary, *Mister Johnson*, 89
120 Cary, *Mister Johnson*, 89
121 Cary, *Mister Johnson*, 89
insistence on the necessity of the civilizing mission—represented here by the road—thus becomes another way in which he is marked as a "stranger" and "foreigner" to the North. As in his fruitless conversations with Bamu, Johnson’s notion of civilization is a mishmash of phrases he’s overheard and intuitions of what his boss Rudbeck values (roads) and does not value (savages). Here and throughout the novel, he can articulate no compelling reason why this notion of civilization might be of value to anyone else.

In moments like these, we can certainly see why a young Achebe dismissed the character as an "embarrassing nitwit."\(^{122}\) In satirizing Johnson’s limited capacity to articulate or implement the civilizing mission, Cary might seem to be laying the failure of this mission at the feet of colonial subjects: if only Nigerian clerks like Johnson were a bit cleverer, a bit more hardworking, the novel might seem to say. As Christopher Fyfe has observed, this strand of the novel would seem to reflect the assumptions of indirect rule: the valorization of the "unspoiled" native over the educated fool, a "familiar treatise on the folly of teaching Africans to rise out of their stations."\(^{123}\) Making a similar point from a different angle, JanMohamed suggests that the novel's derisive attitude towards its protagonist is rooted in a need to reaffirm the Manichean divide between colonizer and colonized.\(^{124}\) From this perspective, the possibility that the civilizing mission might succeed—that it might in fact produce educated Nigerians fluent in English culture—was simply too destabilizing to acknowledge. Thus, the novel must represent Johnson's "civilization" as a grotesque parody, reaffirming the continuing necessity of colonization's civilizing mission.

This read on the novel accounts well for *Mister Johnson*'s first half, and for the novel's depiction of Johnson himself. But it does not fully reckon with the novel's biting depiction of the British colonial administrators, which is arguably even more derisive than its depiction of the colonized.

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\(^{122}\) Achebe, *Home and Exile*, 23.

\(^{123}\) Fyfe, “The Colonial Situation in *Mister Johnson*,” 128.

Certainly, the notion of "civilization" is as opaque to the novel's colonial officers as it is to the hapless Johnson. Indeed, it is the characters at the top of the colonial hierarchy who seem least concerned with what—in theory or in practice—they are doing. As Brian Larkin notes, Cary depicts Assistant District Officer Rudbeck as a man whose commitment to developing the region tips into a "somewhat unhinged" mania rooted in an "unrestrained desire for civilization without regard to practical purpose." At the other end of the spectrum, Rudbeck's superior Bulteel resists all attempts to articulate the means or ends of the colonial project, preferring to occupy his time with whisky and idle chatter. In drawing attention to this aspect of the novel, I develop a reading of *Mister Johnson* that highlights the novel's deep skepticism of civilization talk, suggesting that the novel is ultimately less concerned with upholding the status quo than with critiquing the blundering aimlessness of British colonial policy.

This fundamental lack of direction surfaces quite directly in a conversation between Rudbeck and Bulteel. The most senior colonial administrator that appears in the novel, Bulteel is quite unconcerned with any notion of progress, civilization, or mission: he is happy to be a cog in the machine, executing the decisions of the Secretariat. Rudbeck, greener and still idealistic, has not yet sunk into Bulteel's genial complacency. Theories of indirect rule notwithstanding, Rudbeck notes, British intervention has permanently altered “the old native tribal organization.” If the old social structures are falling apart, he wonders, what will take their place: “Are we going to give them a new civilization,” he asks his superior Bulteel, “or simply let them slide downhill?” Bulteel cheerfully acknowledges that he has no idea—but Rudbeck is unable to let the question go. “I suppose that some people do have an idea,” he hazards, “the Catholics did and the missionaries do, or ought to—

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and I suppose old Arnold did.” Rudbeck senses that his vague desire for “an idea” might be seen by his superiors as old-fashioned or embarrassingly idealistic, and he’s quick to note that missionary or Arnoldian visions of progress would not “do” in the 20th century—but mightn’t there be something similar, some larger ideal to ground the colonial project? Bulteel has nothing to say to this, and Rudbeck takes the hint, ending the conversation with a bit of cheerful, meaningless bluster: “Ours not to reason why.”

The men's uncertainty about their own civilizing mission, Cary suggests, is ultimately rooted in the tenuousness of British civilization itself. Returning to Fada after home leave, Rudbeck pronounces England “a bloody mess” and dejectedly acknowledges that “the whole show is going phut.” An equally gloomy Bulteel acknowledges that “civilization’s in a bad way.” Both men sit somber and uncertain, gazing into the semidarkness of their imperial responsibilities. Bulteel hazards that civilization is “getting on a bit too fast.” Rudbeck posits the reverse—“or not fast enough”—a diagnosis the suggestible Bulteel is equally willing to accept. Both men sense that the onward march of progress is not quite proceeding as planned, but neither has the capacity to identify what exactly has gone wrong; this conversation, like the last, quickly drifts off into platitudes. Cary depicts the real cost of all this drifting unease through Rudbeck's almost maniacal devotion to the idea of the Fada road. Framing Rudbeck's core belief as the notion that "to build a road, any road, is the noblest work a man can do,” the novel hints at the purposelessness of the activity that will occupy so much of the novel's second half. Indeed, Rudbeck's road-building zeal is framed as a bug that he has "caught" from another colonial officer—the contagion metaphor,
again, suggesting a core passivity underlying the frantic planning, clearing and engineering that the road entails. Indeed, when the road is finally complete, it seems to have more agency than Rudbeck does. Contemplating his creation, Rudbeck hears it speak to him:

I’m smashing up the old Fada—I shall change everything and everybody in it. I am abolishing the old ways, the old ideas, the old law; I am bringing wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice, new powers to men and therefore new conflicts. I am the revolution… I destroy and I make new. What are you going to do about it? I am your idea. You made me, so I suppose you know.

But Rudbeck doesn’t know. He feels instead a dull sense of frustration and confusion, sensing that “he has been used and driven like a blind instrument.” He recalls the opinion of “dirty old savages” like Waziri and the Emir: could it be that they were right, that the road will, in fact, bring destruction rather than progress? Might “civilization itself” simply fall to pieces? As he walks away from the road, Rudbeck stoops under the burden of “blind treadmill effort”—framing the whole colonial project as a kind of useless Sisyphean toil.

The novel’s depiction of Rudbeck’s confusion and disillusionment is particularly striking when contrasted with Cary’s nonfiction account of the role of road-building in The Case for African Freedom (1941). Though it may be tempting to read Cary’s nonfiction as a roadmap (so to speak) for the ideology animating the novels, the novel in this case is far more tentative and ambiguous than the essay. In The Case for African Freedom, originally published in George Orwell’s Searchlight Series—a project itself devoted to the reform and improvement of Western civilization—Cary celebrates the power of local development projects. Roads and bridges in remote areas like Borgu, he asserts, “are the very roots of the progress so much desired.”

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136 Cary, Mister Johnson, 43.
137 Cary, Mister Johnson, 186-7.
138 Cary, Mister Johnson, 187.
139 Cary, Mister Johnson, 184.
officer, to cobble together funds for a road project—a saga that sounds a great deal like the fictional Rudbeck’s. But there the similarity ends: in Cary’s recollection, the road did its progressive work just as anticipated: with increased trade, “money and goods began to flow into the villages,” and the rising tide lifted all families. Neighboring villages saw less hunger and poverty, "not so many children with swollen bellies and skeleton faces." Within the larger context of the essay, this account of a successful development project is meant to illustrate the ways in which British administration is effectively preparing Nigeria for self-governance and eventual independence. In this narrative, road-building leads to "trade, order, peace," and indeed "the very beginning of civilization."

This rather upbeat assessment contrasts with Mister Johnson’s more critical and tentative account of roadbuilding. Part of the reason for this change may be the explicitly boosterish tone of the Searchlight series of which The Case for African Freedom was part; that project aimed to stress Britain’s “international and imperial responsibilities” in the midst of the difficult experience of the Second World War; cue the framing of roads and bridges as elements of imperial progress. Mister Johnson, which had no such explicitly political aim, is more dubious about the ability of an officer like Rudbeck to foster development in the face of global economic crisis. In the novel, children continue to go hungry—and not for lack of roads. Rather, Mister Johnson depicts poverty and hunger in Nigeria as a result of the larger world system—specifically, of the “office men” in Europe and America playing the stock market. These businessmen have first “bought too much” and then “tried to sell it again, all at once.” In the novel’s terms, these are transparently foolish decisions, at odds with the basic logic of trade that governs buying and selling in Fada. As a result, children in Fada

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and in London are starving “for exactly the same reasons.” Mister Johnson thus suggests that hunger in Nigeria is a function not only of African underdevelopment but also of a larger economic system in which economic downturns land most harshly on the poor, in whatever part of the world. So although Rudbeck completes the road ahead of schedule, he finds the victory is pyrrhic: the economic benefits are fleeting, his superiors are unimpressed, and he finds himself paralyzed with a numb uncertainty. The ideal of civilization to which he has devoted himself turns out, in the end, to be a mirage.

In stumbling towards this realization, Cary represents Rudbeck as surprisingly like Johnson: both men repeatedly invoke civilization, both have only the haziest notion of what it might mean, and both are fundamentally unable to stop their world from falling to pieces. For Rudbeck, protected by his status and his whiteness, this falling to pieces is limited in scope: frustrated dreams, loneliness, a bad marriage. Johnson, just seventeen and far from home, is not so protected. For him, civilization’s delivers only neglect, condemnation, and a violent death. When higher-ups in the colonial administration get wind of the way that Johnson has financed the road project, the punishment is severe. Johnson is sentenced to death and requests that his "friend" Rudbeck be the one to execute him. This Rudbeck does, passing off Johnson's idea as his own (as he has done throughout the novel). The novel closes with the start of a new day; Rudbeck, perplexed and apathetic, faces the dawn alone.

If Heart of Darkness imagines the immediate consequences of the Scramble for Africa—both the extractive industries and the humanitarian outcry—Mister Johnson imagines an alternate horror: the wreckage and waste of late colonialism. The colonial administration in Cary’s novel is a kind of decrepit machine that just keeps lurching onward. Its functionaries are no longer driven by religious sentiment, by economic greed, by realpolitik; indeed, they seem not to be driven by anything beyond

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145 Cary, Mister Johnson, 161
habit and inertia. The remarkable recurrence of “civilization” in the novel’s text points to the concept’s attenuation: the more Johnson and Rudbeck invoke civilization, the more it becomes clear that neither has any clear notion of the concept. Civilization is an empty signifier, a bottle without an animating genie.

Civilization and Sovereignty: Mid-20th Century Rhetorical Shifts

*Mister Johnson’s* intense anxiety around the meaning of "civilization," and its capacity to ground the colonial project in Nigeria, is reflective of a larger shift in international law and popular discourse alike. Earlier in this chapter, I sketched out the ways in which the nascent discipline of international law grounded late 19th century conceptions of sovereignty in the (relatively undefined) category of civilization. Here, I want to briefly gesture to the ways in which "civilization" and "sovereignty" were rhetorically decoupled over the early-to-mid 20th century. This shift was slow, uneven, and contested—and, many would argue, remains incomplete.146 The creation of the Mandate System in the aftermath of WWI, though ostensibly representing a break from the self-interested imperialism of the past, was nevertheless couched in the same "civilizational hierarchies" that had governed the Berlin Conference.147 "Everywhere," historian Susan Pederson notes, "mandatory administrations deployed the language of civilization to justify their presence."148 Indeed, Lugard, who served on the Permanent Mandates Commission between 1922 and 1936, saw

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146 Gong, *The Standard of Civilization*, 91-2. Gong notes that the decline of the standard of civilization should not be read as its fade into oblivion. On the contrary, he suggests that the standard has been sublimated and reborn in the contemporary garb of human rights.
the new system as a mode of generalizing British colonial ideals—which he had helped to formulate as Governor General of Nigeria.\textsuperscript{149}

At the same time, the new League of Nations included among its members states such as Siam, Iran, Abyssinia, and Turkey—states whose status had been characterized by Lassa Oppenheim, just a few years earlier, as insufficiently civilized to be "received as full members into the Family of Nations."\textsuperscript{150} In 1922, political scientist James Wilford Garner argued that the admission of a number of "more or less backward states" to the League suggested that international law might be inclined to step back from "over-rigorous standards" of civilization as a condition of membership in international society.\textsuperscript{151} In brief, Garner concluded, recent trends suggested a move towards expanding the international community to include all states, "civilized and semi-civilized alike" (he did not, however, speak to the question of "uncivilized" states).\textsuperscript{152} In an address to the Grotius Society in 1929, British lawyer John Fischer Williams asserted that "the notion of 'civilised society' as a community of nations or States distinct from the rest of the world no longer corresponds with the main facts of contemporary life."\textsuperscript{153} Acknowledging "trivial exceptions" to this claim, Williams continued:

\begin{quote}
In the contemporary world it is no longer possible to maintain a view of human society in which some states would constitute a sort of exclusive club, to which election is made by a committee of the more prominent members under rather vague rules...while the rest of humanity is left beyond the pale under the general protection of principles of morality, but excluded from the reign of law.\textsuperscript{154}
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Pedersen, \textit{The Guardians}, 125.
\item Lassa Oppenheim, \textit{International Law: A Treatise} (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1905), 34. Oppenheim to some degree anticipated the change, however. In 1905, he wrote that "All of them [Persia, Siam, China, Korea, Abyssinia] make efforts...to raise their civilization to the level of the Western. They will certainly succeed in this regard in the near future."
\item James Wilford Garner, \textit{Recent Developments in International Law} (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1925), 25, \url{http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.3b521399}.
\item Garner, \textit{Recent Developments in International Law}, 25.
\item John Fischer Williams, "Recognition," \textit{Transactions of the Grotius Society} 15 (1929): 53–82, 60.
\item Williams, "Recognition," \textit{Transactions of the Grotius Society}, 60.
\end{enumerate}
Writing in 1938, University of London law professor H.A. Smith acknowledged similar developments in a tone of greater pique:

In practice we no longer insist that States conform to any common standards of justice, religious toleration, and internal government...Conduct which in the nineteenth century would have placed a government outside the pale of civilized society is now deemed to be no obstacle to diplomatic friendship. This means, in effect, that we have now abandoned the old distinction between civilized and uncivilized states.155

Part of this shift, of course, had to do with growing mobilization for self-determination and independence in the colonized world. At the same time, European nations were increasingly noticing cracks in the veneer of their own civilization. When Germany expressed interest in acting as a Mandatory power following WWI, its civilizational rhetoric was met with a tart response: Germany, the League noted, was responsible for "the greatest crime against humanity and the freedom of peoples that any nation, calling itself civilized, has every consciously committed."156 Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia—a fellow League member—further undermined European claims of civilizational superiority.157 By the late 1930s, the rise of fascism in Europe had raised still more fundamental questions about the foundations of Western civilization. In 1938, University of London law professor W. Friedmann published an article titled, tellingly, "The disintegration of European civilization and the future of International Law." Examining the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, he made clear that the stakes were high:

The question is nothing less than this: European Civilisation has shaped modern International Law. But is European Civilisation still what it was, and, if not, how do the changes affect International Law? Every year has brought that question nearer, and it is no longer possible to evade it ...The task then should be to examine the bases of International Law, to ascertain how far they are still valid, and on which foundations International Law

must be rebuilt.\textsuperscript{158}

These tasks struck many legal thinkers as even more salient in the aftermath of WWII. Reflecting in 1955 on totalitarian aggression and the threat of the hydrogen bomb, Georg Schwarzenberger predicted the coming "evanescence" of the standard of civilization from international law.\textsuperscript{159} In the same year, Oppenheim's foundational tome \textit{International Law}, first published in 1905, dropped the longstanding reference to "civilized states" from its definition of international law, defining the subject simply as "the body of customary and treaty rules which are considered legally binding by States in their intercourse with each other."\textsuperscript{160} Indeed, as early as 1944, Lauterpacht could assert forcefully that "international law today knows of no distinction between civilized and uncivilized States."\textsuperscript{161} Although overstated as a point of fact, the sweeping claim is illustrative of a growing discomfort with direct appeals to civilization as a legal category. By the mid-\textsuperscript{20}th century, the standard of civilization was gradually becoming a "rhetorical anachronism."\textsuperscript{162}

To be sure, these rhetorical shifts did not necessarily entail the transformation of larger structures of international society. It is perfectly possible to change one's language without changing the underlying reality that language describes; several scholars have argued that the standard of civilization has simply been sublimated, since the 1960s, into the language of human rights.\textsuperscript{163} Still, the decline of "civilization" as a routine term in legal analysis is clearly linked to the increased visibility of anticolonial critiques in the postwar UN. In a 1949 debate over the draft Declaration on


\textsuperscript{159}Schwarzenberger, “The Rule of Law and the Disintegration of the International Society,” 234.

\textsuperscript{160}Oppenheim, \textit{International Law}, 4. Although Oppenheim himself died in 1919, later editions of the book were edited by colleagues and continued to be updated until 1967.


\textsuperscript{162}Gong, \textit{The Standard of Civilization in International Society}, 81.

the Rights and Duties of States, for example, one member of the International Law Commission objected to the term "civilised countries" on the grounds that the expression "dated back to the colonial era with its concept of 'the white man's burden';" the term was duly removed.164 As the composition of the General Assembly changed, such debates became more forceful and more public. Newly independent Third World states sought to banish from the UN "the old imperial vocabulary of international civilization."165 In December 1960—a year in which seventeen African states, including Nigeria, joined the UN—the General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which affirmed that “All peoples have the right to self-determination" and that a purported lack of civilization "should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence."166 By the late 1960s, the civilized-uncivilized distinction had been "generally expunged" from the language of international law.167

Yet this remained a vexed and gradual transition, as is evident in a 1966 paper by one of the architects of Third World Approaches to International Law, R.P. Anand. Considering how the "new" African and Asian states viewed international law, Anand first asserts that the standard of civilization had been totally abrogated: "Needless to say, the criterion of "civilised nation" as a basis for participation in the community of nations has been abandoned."168 Yet in the very next sentence he qualifies that statement, suggesting that, in fact, the standard has not been abandoned so much as reinterpreted; "civilisation," he writes, is no longer assumed to mean "Christian-Western

166 "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), December 14 1960, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Independence.aspx
civilisation. By this method he accounts for the persistence of "civilisation" in key texts such as the Statutes of the World Court and International Law Commission. Still, Anand views these references to civilization and civilized nations as damaging relics of an "outmoded colonial age," legal structures in need of "reshap[ing] and renovat[ion]" for a new era.

Anand was not, to my knowledge, following the ins and outs of Nigerian regional politics particularly closely in 1966. If he had, he might have been startled to hear how easily and enthusiastically regional leaders in Eastern Nigeria deployed the "outmoded" rhetoric of civilizational attainment. For just as the standard of civilization was coming under fire within a UN General Assembly profoundly reshaped by newly decolonized member states, Eastern Nigerian politicians contemplating secession turned to that rhetoric to justify the East's right to self-determination. In other words, Biafran propaganda in 1966 and 1967 essentially reinvigorated an argument—that sovereignty was justified in terms of civilizational achievements—that had become increasingly untenable even within the mainstream of international law. The next section will explore how Biafran propaganda mobilizes this civilizational rhetoric to justify the would-be state's political aspirations.

**Civilizational Discourse in Biafran Propaganda, 1966-1967**

As I discuss at greater length in the introduction to this dissertation, the six years following Nigerian Independence were marked by growing regional tensions and political violence. Those tensions culminated, in 1966, in two coups. In January, an initial coup overthrew the civilian

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government;¹⁷¹ in July, a second coup installed as the new head of government Yakubu Gowon, a thirty-one-year-old Sandhurst-trained lieutenant colonel.¹⁷² Over the following year, Nigeria unraveled. Between May and September, organized massacres of Igbo civilians in cities across the North killed tens of thousands.¹⁷³ Hundreds of thousands of survivors fled from their homes in the North to the East, many with critical injuries. (These are many of the individuals photographed in the *Nigerian Pogrom* pamphlet with which I began this chapter.) By late 1966, many Igbos were deeply skeptical that a unified Nigeria offered a safe place for them.

Historians disagree about when, exactly, Ojukwu and other Eastern politicians fully resolved upon pursuing independence. In late 1966 and early 1967, however, Ojukwu was still meeting with Gowon and other regional leaders, ostensibly attempting to find a workable path forward for the East within a united Nigeria. During the same period, however, the rhetoric in the east’s primary state-run newspaper suggests a basically unbridgeable gap between the regions. That gap comes to center not on revenue or political structure, but on that most nebulous and useful of concepts, "civilization." In this section, I track these rhetorical tropes as they appear in the East’s primary newspaper, the state-run *Nigerian Outlook* (later the *Biafra Sun*), from late 1966 through mid-1967.¹⁷⁴

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¹⁷¹ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 172-4. The January coup promised to end tribalism and corruption and was initially broadly popular; many Nigerians were disillusioned by the country’s political troubles and welcomed what they saw as a fresh start. However, the new military government—led Major General John Aguiyi-Ironsi—quickly ran aground on regional tensions. Most of the coup plotters, including Aguiyi-Ironsi, were Igbo. Many Northerners noted with anger that these officers had killed the North’s two most prominent politicians (Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and Premier of Northern Nigeria Ahmadu Bello), while leaving powerful Igbo members of the old government (such as President Nnamdi Azikiwe) unharmed. Adding insult to injury, in May 1966 Aguiyi-Ironsi abolished the country’s federal structure in favor of a unitary system—a move that Northerners feared spelled Southern (and specifically Igbo) domination.

¹⁷² The choice of Gowon was meant to avoid further inflaming regional tensions. Although he had spent most of his life in Zaria and was seen as a Northerner, Gowon was neither Hausa nor Fulani (nor Muslim). Instead, he was a Christian from Plateau State, part of the Middle Belt between Southern and Northern Nigeria. Gowon immediately abrogated Aguiyi-Ironsi’s unifying decree, returning the country to a federal system.


¹⁷⁴ After the Biafran Declaration of Independence, the *Outlook* was renamed the *Biafra Sun*. Here, I refer to the *Outlook* when referencing pre-Independence articles and to the *Sun* when referencing articles published on or after May 31 1967. However, they are, in all but name, the same newspaper.
While other newspapers were also published in Biafra during the war, the *Biafra Sun* was the most substantial—both lengthier and of visibly higher quality in terms of paper and ink. It featured news reporting with a strong pro-Biafra slant, letters to the editor, and editorials from recurring columnists—as well as occasional quizzes, political cartoons, and a periodic children’s section. In short, it offers a reliable snapshot of how powerbrokers within the Biafran state—and particularly within the Ministry of Information—wished to frame the progress of the war and the political goals for which it was being fought.

A central framing was the claim that Eastern civilization was fundamentally threatened by Northern savagery and barbarism. This trope emerged in the *Nigerian Outlook* in the aftermath of the 1966 massacres, a good six months before the East would declare independence as Biafra. In November 1966, for example, the *Outlook* ran a piece titled “Story of a Brave and Civilised People.” The subtitle asserted that Easterners’ reactions to the “barbaric actions” of Northerners has demonstrated for the world “where in Nigeria the civilised people live.” The article goes on to assert that (unnamed) foreign radio stations have denounced the anti-Igbo massacres as “medieval, feudalistic, and reminiscent of the middle ages in Europe”—a phrasing that might have been lifted directly from any number of British colonial writings about Northern Nigeria. Notable here and throughout the article is the author’s close attention to how Northern “barbarity” ought to be understood by both foreign news media and, ultimately, global public opinion. In framing the East as the home of “civilised people” who display the “reasonable behavior expected in modern international circles,” this writer explicitly links Eastern “civilization” to the norms of international society. Well before the declaration of Biafran independence, in other words, the East’s paper of record is already suggesting that Eastern civilization deserves a certain kind of external recognition.

This emphasis on a civilizational gap pervades the *Nigerian Outlook* throughout the months preceding the war, appearing not only in the paper’s reporting but also in numerous letters to the editor. In a December 1966 letter, for example, A.N.C. Okoye of Onitsha suggests that Southern tenacity and competence had, over the preceding decades, helped to develop the North—only to be unjustly repaid with violence and aggression. Okoye argues that only the hard work of Southerners has allowed the North to advance—"educationally, socially, culturally, and technologically"—over the past decades.¹⁷⁶ Thanks to Southerners, Okoye writes, the North had schools and colleges. Thanks to Southerners, the North developed "firms, industries...private enterprises" that provided employment to Northern "idlers." Having repaid Southern industry with violence, Okoye argues, the North will relapse "into the Dark Ages," jealous of Southern progress but unable to achieve it unaided. In a conclusion even starker than Conrad's or Cary's, Okoye asserts that Northern Nigerians "prefer darkness to light."

The framing of the North as a place of darkness surfaces again in another December 1966 letter to the editor, this one from Chuhnonye Onah of Nsukka. Like Okoye, Onah emphasizes Easterners' role in developing the North from a barren desert into a "paradise," in spite of the region's "overwhelming savagery."¹⁷⁷ In massacring their would-be saviors, Onah writes, the "Northern savages" have chosen "privation and darkness" over progress and development. Subsequent letters in *Nigerian Outlook* similarly condemn the North as "ignorant, feudalistic enemies of progress"¹⁷⁸ and inheritors of a "medieval civilisation" woefully out of sync with the East's "thirtieth-century civilisation" (presumably quite advanced indeed!).¹⁷⁹ These letters are not necessarily representative of larger public opinion in the East at this time; by virtue of their English

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literacy and membership in a newspaper-reading public, the writers are almost certainly more highly educated than most. However, the editors’ decision to publish (and perhaps to solicit) these letters certainly helps to construct a certain sense of a shared “Eastern” identity—hard-working, forward-thinking, civilized—an identity that would, in a few months’ time, be recast as “Biafran.”

As the months passed and the political crisis deepened, the readers of the Outlook increasingly encountered writing that articulated a link between Northern barbarity and the illegitimacy of the Nigerian state. In one particularly striking example from April 1967, Christian Ofodile recounts at length Easterners’ sufferings during the previous year’s massacres and suggests that such crimes undercut the federal government’s claim to legitimacy:

...not only did Gowon's men kill 30,000 uncommitted citizens from Eastern Nigeria, they also saw to it that those responsible for the killings got away unpunished. We all know that by civilized standards, this is illegal and unconstitutional.180

In three subsequent paragraphs, Ofodile focuses on several specific instances of the government's failure to hold killers accountable. Each of these paragraphs ends with a repetition of the original claim: such conduct is, "by civilised standards, illegal and unconstitutional." The writer does not invoke particular Nigerian laws or sections of the Constitution to support this claim; rather, he turns to that old standby, “civilised standards.” Thus the claim that the North is uncivilized gradually comes to encompass a second claim: that the Northern-dominated federal government is acting illegally and unconstitutionally, exposing its illegitimacy as a member of the civilized community of nations. In Nigeria, Ofodile asserts, legality itself has been overturned. For a civilized and lawful people like the Igbo, there can be no future here.

As arguments like these implicitly suggested to Outlook readers that Eastern independence might be a viable path forward, negotiations among regional and federal leaders continued at the

180 Christian Ofodile, "For How Long Must East Be Insulted?" Nigerian Outlook, April 15 1967, 3.
national level. A last-ditch attempt to balance the power of federal and regional leaders took place in Aburi, Ghana, in January 1967. The Aburi Accord was loosely written and Gowon and Ojukwu subsequently disagreed about what, exactly, it required.181 In March, Ojukwu announced that the government of Eastern Nigeria would take over all federal taxes and revenues in the East, effectively making the region independently administered. Gowon responded by instituting economic sanctions and blockading the Eastern Coast. In mid-May, the *Nigerian Outlook* published an article titled “We have reached the end of the road.”182 Citing the previous year’s massacres, the author concluded that “the North and South are still poles apart in civilisation” and that the only solution to the “distressing impasse” would be for the East to go its separate way. "For how long," the Outlook asked "shall we wait for the slumbering North, and slow our pace to accommodate them? For how long shall we nurse the hope that the North would soon rediscover herself and move with the modern times?"183 The answer proved to be just a few more weeks. On May 26th, the Eastern consultative assembly authorized Ojukwu to declare independence; on May 30th, he did.

In declaring independence, Ojukwu drew heavily on the discourse of civilization. His speech to the consultative assembly declared that Biafran independence was premised on a desire to preserve "a progressive society unhampered in its progress and development by feudalistic and reactionary forces."184 In the actual Proclamation of the Republic of Biafra, Ojukwu begins with a striking premise: "Throughout the period of Nigeria's precarious existence as a single political entity, 

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181 The crux of the debate at Aburi was between Gowon and Ojukwu, in large part because the 1966 anti-Igbo massacres made Easterners, more than other Nigerians, skeptical about their place in a unified Nigeria. Still, the West shared similar concerns about regional autonomy, and Yoruba statesman Obafemi Awolowo threatened in April 1967 that the West would secede if the East did. As it happened, the federal government made yet another structural reorganization that mollified the West; Gowon also brought Awolowo (previously in jail for treason) into the Supreme Council. Ultimately, only the East seceded—though Biafran political leaders continued to try to pressure the West to throw its support to Biafra throughout the early part of the war.

182 "We have reached the end of the road," *Nigerian Outlook*, May 15 1967, 3.

183 "We have reached the end of the road," *Nigerian Outlook*, May 15 1967, 3.

184 "Address by HE the Military Governor, Lt.-Col. C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, to the Joint Meeting of the Advisory Committee of Chiefs and Elders and the Consultative Assembly," May 26 1967, 1-34, 28.
Eastern Nigerians have always believed in fundamental human rights and principles as they are accepted and enjoyed in civilized communities." In claiming Biafran sovereignty, Ojukwu asserts that the new state belongs to the international community by virtue of both its "civilized" status and its commitment to human rights; in fact, the latter is evidence of the former. If the late 20th century commitment to human rights can be read as a new incarnation of the standard of civilization, then perhaps we might look to Biafra as a key inflection point for this shift.

Implicit throughout my reading of these Outlook articles is the connection between British colonization and Eastern claims of civilization. This link is evident on several levels, from the language in which the Outlook is printed (English) to the frequent slippage, in these writings, between Christianity and civilization. Such connections might be read as mere vestiges of colonization, but that Biafran state documents often explicitly identify Biafran “civilization” as a (welcome) British colonial inheritance. The fullest development of this line of argument appears in a September 1967 piece in the Biafra Sun, which attributes Biafran civilization to the effects of Christianity and colonial rule. Biafra, it suggests, is best understood as a "progressive product" of British civilization. British support for the Nigerian state, then, is cast as a particularly cruel betrayal:

It is sad and shameful to reflect that Britain, which laid the foundation of Christian culture and modern civilisation in Biafra, instigated the pogrom on Biafrans in 1966 and is today giving deadly weapons to the barbarous and godless people of Northern Nigeria to destroy the culture and civilisation she built in Biafra. When Britain colonised Southern and

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186 Biafra’s deployment of the civilization/savagery dichotomy continued throughout the war years, although by 1968 talk of civilization was increasingly eclipsed by genocide claims (as I discuss in Chapter Three). These two frameworks were not mutually exclusive, however, and were sometimes deployed simultaneously: genocide was framed as the ultimate marker of Nigeria’s failure to meet a basic standard of civilization. A 1968 Biafran government pamphlet makes this case succinctly when it asserts that: "...savagery and civilized conduct are on two opposite poles, and to achieve its genocidal aims, Nigeria decided early that the observation of international codes of behavior would greatly hinder the achievement of her objective of exterminating all Biafrans." Here, Biafran accusations of genocide function not only to highlight the threat posed by Nigeria, but also to mark Biafra’s civilizational superiority. See The Case for Biafra (First Independence Anniversary Edition) (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Republic of Biafra, 1968), 21.
187 For a fuller account of the role of “Christian civilization” specifically in Biafran rhetoric, see Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 109-127.
Northern Nigeria, Britons of those days brought with them the advanced British culture and encouraged the development of human and material resources in the colony and protectorate; but the savage idiots of Northern Nigeria found it of no use...

The question is, if the social misfits of Northern Nigeria hate Biafrans because we are progressive, would Britain also hate us for being progressive? Or has Britain become reactionary? If not, why should Britain join Gowon and his murderous gang in destroying her progressive product—the Biafrans? If a man has two sons and one is industrious, painstaking and intelligent as the father, while the other is a silly lazy loafer, which of the sons should the father love and encourage?\(^{188}\)

This framing serves two primary purposes: on the one hand, it allows Biafra to paint British support for Nigeria—or even British neutrality—as a betrayal of its (successful) development of Southern Nigeria. As the *Biafra Sun* put it in July 1967, how could the UK set itself in opposition to "a people that have cherished so much of her own civilisation"?\(^{189}\) Second, framing Biafran civilization as a British inheritance allows the Biafran government to include non-Igbo minorities within the penumbra of Biafran civilization—something that the frequent recourse to Igbo traditions of democratic political organization did not allow. If Biafran civilization is defined by the British colonial inheritance as much (or more than) by a pre-colonial Igbo inheritance, then Biafran civilization can be seen to encompass the Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ogoja, and other minorities as well as the dominant Igbo.

There is one final, more specific way in which the Biafran concept of civilisation draws on British colonial traditions, and that is its emphasis on separate development. As previously discussed, British colonial administration in Nigeria operated quite differently in the North and the South. As the repeated description of the North as "feudal" suggests, Eastern/Biafran writers asserted that their modes of political organization were fundamentally different (that is, more democratic) than those of the North. The British notion that the South ought to "develop" along

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\(^{188}\) *Biafra Sun*, September 10 1967, 7.

\(^{189}\) "The Dictator wants to intimidate Britain," *Biafra Sun*, July 17 1967, 3.
different lines than the North was, Biafran leaders suggested, correct. According to this line of thought, Amalgamation was a mistake that had left independent Nigeria a baggy hodgepodge of peoples with no meaningful shared past or future. As Ojukwu put it—quoting Tafawa Balewa a decade and a half before—the different parts of Nigeria had "attained different stages of development." As a result, Nigeria itself existed "only on paper." Trying to suture together peoples at such different stages of development, the argument went, was a hopeless task: better to allow the different regions to follow their own, independent paths forward. In one of his final speeches before declaring independence, Ojukwu asserted that the East wanted simply to pursue its own course, "unhampered in its progress and development by [the] feudalistic and reactionary forces with which it has been our misfortune to contend all these years." 

Beginning in June 1967, it did.

Custodians of this Civilization: The Ahiara Turn, 1969

"Biafra is going to die for having had confidence in our civilization": So wrote French journalist Yves-Guy Bergès in mid-1968. Identifying the besieged Igbos with Christianity and Western modernity, Bergès implied that Biafra—but not Nigeria—was part of the civilized "family of nations." Using similar language, German historian Immanuel Geiss attributed the conflict to a difference in “civilizational level” between the East and the North. Such arguments were widespread during the war; the claims to civilization that Biafrans had appropriated from colonial discourse had, as the war continued, migrated back into European news coverage of the conflict.
the middle of the war, both Nigerians and outsiders were familiar with the narrative that Biafrans were, in Ojukwu’s words, “the most civilized…black people on earth.”

As I have argued in this chapter, the emphasis on civilization in early Biafran pamphlets and propaganda is not incidental. Rather, it emerges from an understanding of sovereignty that dates to the consolidation of positivist international law in the late 19th century—an understanding that was rooted ultimately in the assertion that only civilized states enjoyed international legal sovereignty. That a concept as central to international law as sovereignty could be so tenuously grounded speaks to the enormous cultural resonance of the term "civilization”—and, therefore, to the importance of cultural narratives in shaping this legal category. Such frameworks would prove to be surprisingly resilient over the 20th century. Even as British novelists such as Conrad and Cary articulated the deep fractures within the ostensibly secure concept of European (or British) civilization, that concept was only gradually weeded out of the rhetoric of international law. Ironically, Biafran propagandists turned toward civilizational discourse just as international legal theorists turned away from it, articulating a narrative in which the Eastern embrace of British colonialism produced a group of uniquely “civilized” Africans: the Biafran people. Although this would not be the only framework for articulating Biafran sovereignty claims, it functioned as an early and powerful demonstration of Biafra’s ambivalent position within the larger landscape of decolonization: as representatives of other African states sought to reshape the meaning of self-determination, the Biafra Sun kept its colonial heritage close.

I close this chapter, however, by noting a final transformation in the Biafran rhetoric of civilization. In June of 1969, two years into the war, Ojukwu delivered a speech on the “Principles of the Biafran Revolution” in the small town of Ahiara. The speech, which has come to be known

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as the Ahiara Declaration, was, in Chinua Achebe’s words, “an attempt to capture the meaning of the struggle for Biafran sovereignty.” Following a (rather optimistic) account of Biafra’s military situation, the Declaration articulates what Biafra stands for, what it stands against, and how the state will be governed. At this point in the war, Biafra had lost nearly ninety-five percent of its territory, its citizens were malnourished and exhausted, and hope of further international recognition had faded. Although the text confidently predicts a Biafran victory, its authors were surely aware that the declaration might be the last chance to record for posterity a vision of Biafran ideals.

The Ahiara Declaration was drafted over a period of three months by a group of elite Biafran intellectuals at Ojukwu’s request. The group was led, and handpicked, by Chinua Achebe and included literary scholars Emmanuel Obiechina and Ben Obumselu as well as historians, a political theorist, a judge, and the Commissioner for Information. The final text was broadcast on June 1, 1969, and subsequently circulated in pamphlet form both within Biafra and abroad, to a mixed reception. In his 2012 memoir There Was A Country, Achebe recalls that listeners to Ojukwu’s address received it with pleasure: “People listened from wherever they were,” Achebe wrote. “It sounded right to them: freedom, quality, self-determination, excellence.” This memory may be shaped by Achebe’s position as lead author; other accounts suggest that well-to-do Biafrans were put off by the Declaration’s suggestion that private property be abolished, and many others were simply flummoxed by the gap between its idealistic rhetoric and the bitter struggle of day-to-day life. As Austine Okwu wrote years later, “the Declaration seemed like dressing up in one’s best clothes with no place to go.”

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196 Achebe, There Was a Country, 148.
197 Achebe, There Was a Country, 143-49. Ojukwu’s reliance on the literary elite was not uniformly embraced; one detractor within the Biafran political establishment warned that the leader’s “consuming solicitude for the Biafran literary personalities” was a distraction from the business of winning the ground war. See Austine Okwu, “The Ahiara Declaration: Polemics and Politics,” in Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War, eds. Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (Suffolk: James Currey, 2016): 81-107, 86.
198 Achebe, There Was a Country, 149.
I read the Declaration as, among other things, a final attempt to articulate the meaning of Biafra—written in the full knowledge that the war was all but lost. It is particularly striking, then, to see Achebe and his co-authors make one final intervention in the civilization discourse that this chapter has tracked. Towards the opening of the Declaration, the text alludes to Biafra’s role as a bastion of civilization in terms that should by now sound familiar:

For two long years we have been locked in mortal combat with an enemy unequalled in viciousness; for two long years, defenceless and weak, we have withstood without respite the concerted assault of a determined foe. We have fought alone, we have fought with honour, we have fought in the highest traditions of Christian civilization.200

Here the Declaration takes an unexpected turn. Rather than using the trope of civilization to suggest a common purpose between Biafra and Britain—as both Biafran and British activists had frequently done during the intervening war years—the Declaration turns “civilization” against the British. “The very custodians of this civilization and our one-time mentors,” Ojukwu declared, “are the very self-same monsters who have vowed to devour us.”201 Referring to British support for the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, the Declaration suggests that the British have squandered their moral capital as “custodians of civilization”—not through abuses particular to colonialism, but rather by failing to support Biafran self-determination. British resistance to Biafran statehood, the Declaration argues, is fundamentally a problem of white supremacy:

When the Nigerians violated our basic human rights and liberties, we decided reluctantly but bravely to found our own state, to exercise our inalienable right to self-determination as our only remaining hope for survival as a people. Yet, because we are black, we are denied by the white powers the exercise of this right which they themselves have proclaimed inalienable. In our struggle we have learnt that the right of self-determination is inalienable, but only to the white man.202

The Declaration’s sharp critique of racism—and concomitant commitment to situate Biafra within a pan-African and diasporic Black nationalist consciousness—marks a striking ideological shift from the rhetoric of late 1966 and early 1967. In those earlier texts, the Ministry of Information essentially never mentions race or racism. To the degree that British colonialism is mentioned, it is celebrated as a key source of Biafra’s progressive mentality—as when the *Pogrom* pamphlet with which I began argued that Eastern Nigerians had “whole-heartedly accepted the modern ideas and techniques” spread via British imperialism. And as we have seen, Eastern and Biafran propaganda rarely hesitated to appropriate the colonial tropes of savagery and barbarism—that long *Heart of Darkness* undertow—to describe the Northern enemy. By late in the war, however, this rhetoric had shifted: rather than celebrating Biafra’s British roots, the Ahiara Declaration describes a British devolution from “mentors” to “monsters”—an account of civilizational decline that, unlike in Conrad or Cary, makes room for a new set of inheritors. The Biafrans themselves, the Declaration promised, would become the newest custodians of civilization—writing and rewriting the old narrative in the hopes of making space for themselves on the world stage.

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*Nigerian Pogrom*, 1.
Chapter 2: Starving Children, Sickly States

Allegories of Youthful Development

On the one-year anniversary of Biafra’s Declaration of Independence, the government-run *Biafra Sun* was in a celebratory mood. "Exactly a year ago,” columnist Roy Ezeabasili intoned, “a new nation was born to Africa and the world…the baby was named Biafra.”¹ Ezeabasili’s metaphor picks up on the narrative of development that we have previously seen, in more general terms, as a key metaphor in the rhetoric around decolonization: the postcolonial state is “born” anew at independence and grows into maturity by taking its place on the world stage. Indeed, the pages of the *Sun* turn repeatedly to metaphors of birth and childhood to understand Biafra’s entry into the international community, variously celebrating the “birth of the ten-day old Biafra state” and framing the new state as “child of true nationalism.”² The *Biafra Sun* also prominently featured images of actual children, often dressed up in military garb and wielding toy weapons. Captions and accompanying articles emphasize children’s role as guarantors and symbols of Biafra’s future greatness: Biafra, like the children themselves, would grow into full maturity and strength in due time.

Americans and Europeans following international news in the late 1960s would have encountered a rather different image of the Biafran child, however. As famine decimated the Biafran civilian population in mid-1968, malnutrition and protein deficiency (kwashiorkor) took a particular toll on children. By August, international reporting on the conflict had rendered the “Biafran baby”

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iconic: horribly distended belly, emaciated limbs, hair faded to red or white. These photographs of starving children were central to both news coverage in the Western press and to appeals by activist groups such as Oxfam, the World Council of Churches, and the Comité d’action pour le Biafra. Perhaps the most iconic photo of the war is a 1969 image by British photojournalist Don McCullin that exemplifies the genre (Fig. 6). The photograph depicts an albino boy, barely able to support himself on sticklike legs, clutching an empty food tin over his heart. Other similarly emaciated children look on in the background. Originally titled “Albino Boy,” this photo has in later years become known simply as “Biafra.” That elision—the starving child for the would-be state—is precisely the trope that this chapter explores.

Such images shocked the conscience of British viewers, galvanizing an activist movement that expanded well beyond the Igbo student and missionary circles with which it began. Yet in focusing on starving children, the mainstream British media coverage largely framed the conflict as a humanitarian disaster. It was certainly that, but it was also a political conflict—one with roots in colonial administration, regional tensions, migration patterns, and deep weaknesses in the federal structure of the Nigerian state. Little of this political background appeared in most of the international reporting—and, even where it did, readers’ attention often drifted towards the shocking images. Thus, “Biafra” as media event came to denote a land of starving children—an association that ultimately undermined Biafran sovereignty claims. As historian Lasse Heerten writes, "Who, in the end, thinks a people symbolized by starving infants to be capable of creating a state?"

After the war’s end, this strand of media coverage made its way into many works of fiction examining the conflict. This chapter focuses on how the image of the suffering child, in particular, is transformed in Biafran war novels of the 1970s and 80s. I argue that the children in post-Civil War

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4 Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism*, 139.
literature do not simply replicate the icons of humanitarian distress that formed such an integral part of the international news coverage. Rather, the novels I explore figure children as allegorical representations of the nascent state of Biafra. Rhetorically framing Biafra-the-child as a young and growing state offers an alternative imagination of the Biafran child—one that postwar writers use to transform a trope that had, by the time of their writing, come to define the war. In doing so, they invite readers into a different type of relationship with Biafra’s infants: one that downplays individual identification and the empathy it affords, and instead privileges a structural perspective on the conflict.

The first part of this chapter develops a theory of allegory by drawing on both literary theory and Kole Omotoso’s 1972 novel *The Combat*, an acerbic allegory that retells the civil war as a conflict between two friends who’ve quarreled over a street child. Looking closely at Omotoso’s novel reveals the complexity of his allegorical framing: rather than a simple one-to-one mapping between the literal and the figurative, *The Combat* operates at several levels—opening up multiple readings of the relationships among Biafra, Nigeria, and the international community. Part of the work that this novel does is thus to invite readers to imagine, and move between, these disparate framings of the conflict’s origins and nature.

The second part of this chapter develops this argument in more detail through close readings of two other novels of the Nigeria-Biafra War. The first is Auberon Waugh’s *A Bed of Flowers* (1971)—a strange rewriting of *As You Like It*, in which Shakespeare’s pastoral romance is threaded through with the English characters’ anxiety about their responsibility to save starving Nigerian children. The second is Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982), the story of a wealthy Nigerian woman who joins the army and navigates a relationship with an English lover as the war unfolds around them. Both novels invest hope for the future in a child who is literally named Biafra. In the former novel that child lives; in the latter he dies. Like Omotoso, both Waugh and Emecheta lived in
the UK throughout the war years and thus experienced the conflict primarily through British journalistic and activist accounts. Thus, I read their writing in relation to the wartime reporting that centered on children—examining how the novels frame news coverage as a plot point and respond formally to the content of that news coverage. In their canny rewritings of the figure of the child, these novels invite readers to identify and critique a trope that had, by the time of their writing, come to define the war.

**Theorizing Allegory**

Allegory has not, over the past two centuries, been held in terribly high regard among literary critics. Framed as a dreary one-to-one mapping between a literal narrative plot and some larger historical or spiritual narrative, allegory is easy to hate: formulaic and heavy-handed, it seems to suck the pleasure out of interpretation. As Nicholas Halmi notes, many critics in the 18th century expected allegory to atone for its inherent limitations "by rendering its meaning as transparently as possible."\(^5\) As a result, he concludes dryly, "the least interesting allegories were judged the most successful."\(^6\) This dim view of allegory took on the veneer of settled fact in the post-Romantic era, anchored in the criticism of figures such as Coleridge\(^7\) (in the English tradition) and Goethe, Schelling, and Schlegel (in European thought).\(^8\) Part of this critique relied on a distinction between

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6 Halmi, “Coleridge on Allegory and Symbol,” 353.

7 Halmi, “Coleridge on Allegory and Symbol,” 346. Though Coleridge is widely remembered for his elevation of the symbol over allegory, he was not in fact as critical of allegory as later critics such as Paul de Man have implied. As Halmi points out, Coleridge reprinted his own *Allegoric Vision* (1795) three times during the years he was developing his account of the relationship between allegory and symbol.

symbolism and allegory, defined in terms that clearly prioritized the former. The symbol, Coleridge wrote, "enunciates the whole" of a particular reality while also forming an integral part of that reality—it functions in two separate yet complementary senses simultaneously. Allegory, in contrast, is "but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language," lacking any organic unity with the reality it is meant to denote. Though Coleridge spoke highly of allegory at other points—and indeed authored allegorical works himself—the Romantic critique proved resilient, returning in the later 19th century in the work of Symbolist poets, and in the early 20th century in the thinking of W.B. Yeats.

More recent criticism has taken issue with the precedence afforded the symbol. For both Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, the symbol is a kind of mirage: a promise of definite, conclusive meaning that can never be fulfilled. Allegory, in contrast, makes no false promises. Instead, allegory makes visible the distance between literal and figural meaning, "renouncing...the desire to coincide." In that space of difference and disjuncture, new interpretive possibilities are born. Thus while the symbol "remains persistently the same," allegory "constantly unfold(s) in new and surprising ways." Whether one thinks of allegory as operating on three, four, or even seven levels, the key insight is that allegory highlights—rather than hides—the discontinuities among the different levels. This chapter centers that flexibility as a resource, demonstrating the ways in which allegory—far from ironing out the inconsistencies of a complicated political situation like Biafra—in fact gives writers the resources to highlight multiple ways of "reading" Biafra's past, present, and future.

9 Samuel Taylor Coleridge et al., Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 30.
10 Coleridge, Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose, 30.
It in this context of theorizing allegory's capacity to represent complex social realities that I wish to place Fredric Jameson's contentious 1986 essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." The essay famously argues that all Third World texts are "necessarily allegorical." Without recounting the substantial body of literature that this assertion has sparked, we can note that Aijaz Ahmad and many subsequent detractors have criticized Jameson for his sweeping suppression of "differences among and within" both the putative "first" and "third" worlds. Other readers have been more sympathetic to Jameson's argument; Neil Lazarus, for example, finds that Jameson's essay "raises massively consequential questions" and remains essential reading for postcolonialists. Yet relatively few of Jameson's critics or defenders have located "Third World Literature" in the context of Jameson's other writings on allegory, which stretch from his early (1979) account of Wyndham Lewis' modernist novels to the sweeping tome Allegory and Ideology (2019). Situating the 1986 piece in the context of Jameson's long-running commitment to allegory helps clarify some of the essay's admittedly slippery arguments.

Of central importance is what, really, Jameson means by allegory. While his early work frames allegory straightforwardly—individuals standing in for their larger nations—in "Third World Literature" and especially Allegory and Ideology Jameson makes clear that he understands allegory as a complex and multivalent mapping project rather than a series of one-to-one identifications. Against the mystifications of the symbol, Jameson's essay frames allegory as a mode of writing in which equivalences among the various levels are "in constant change and transformation." As he puts it in Allegory and Ideology, "genuine allegory does not seek the 'meaning' of a work, but rather functions to

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reveal its structure of multiple meanings.¹⁸ In framing third world literature as allegorical, he is not therefore identifying third world texts as simplistic, but rather, as Imre Szeman puts it, "allow[ing] us to consider them as the extremely complex objects they are."¹⁹ The difference between First and Third World texts, in this essay, is not that Third World texts are allegories and First World texts are not; it is that all texts are allegorical—but that that allegory, in the Third World, is "conscious and overt" whereas it remains "unconscious" in the First World. Looking at the long durée of Jameson's writings on allegory makes obvious what can be occluded by a close focus on the 1986 essay alone: that he sees allegory as a complex structure of signification present, in different ways, in all texts emerging from the late 20th century. It is this sense of allegory—in the tradition of Benjamin and de Man—with which this chapter works.

The trickiest element of Jameson's account of national allegory is, in fact, not 'allegory' but 'national.' Imre Szeman, generally a defender of the 1986 essay, notes that while Jameson offers a robust (though often misread) concept of allegory, the term 'nation' is undertheorized. The nation at some points simply stands in for the political; at others, it names a kind of community that, as Szeman notes, "is idealized when it should be placed into question."²⁰ In a later commentary on the original essay, Jameson takes issue with the claim that the original essay "fetishized the national" at the expense of other political (and allegorical) forms.²¹ Yet he also acknowledges that political allegory need be national:

...a later period of world literary development that one might still characterize as Third World began to allegorize other kinds of collective units, subgroups, and ethnicities, as in the Biafra rebellion....indeed, the whole period of the wars of national liberation produced a variety of group models that resist the old models of the nation and of so-called nation

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²¹ Jameson, Allegory and Ideology, 214.
Jameson is surely correct to note that the literary output of the Biafra war is not the literary output of traditional postcolonial national consolidation—a *Things Fall Apart* or a *Nervous Conditions*. Yet the framing of the “Biafra rebellion” as imagined in non-national terms seems to beg the question, and indeed to skip over the most interesting problems that the corpus of Biafra allegories raise. Certainly Biafra’s most ardent supporters characterized the young state in emphatically national terms—a characterization that endures in many postwar novels. But part of what makes these postwar novels interesting is the way in which they articulate multiple conflicting notions of what sort of collectivity Biafra is. Is it a nation? A marginalized region of Nigeria? An incarnation of Christian civilization? An expression of Igbo cultural identity? A utopian dream available to people of all backgrounds? My reading of Biafra novels in this chapter shows that allegory functions to articulate multiple visions of collectivity—only some of which are national.

That complexity is visible in Kole Omotoso’s *The Combat*, a short novel published in 1972, while its author was completing his graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh. At the literal level, the novel tells the story of two friends embroiled in a fight over an unintentional injury to a child. The dispute starts as a relatively minor scuffle between long-time friends Chuku and Ojo; when Chuku accidentally hits the street child Isaac with his car while backing out of a petrol station, Ojo demands that his friend apologize. Chuku refuses. Over the course of the next week, the friends’ quarrel becomes absurdly inflated—both men agree to fight to the death, and the conflict is reported in newspapers throughout Nigeria, then throughout the world, attracting vast crowds and ultimately involving arms trafficking and complex geopolitical intrigue. The novel closes before the planned combat actually takes place. As the reader learns in the novel’s final pages, the child over

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whom the men are ostensibly fighting has already died—though none of the novel's protagonists are able to grasp that, and the fighting proceeds apace.

The novel's compressed time scale and absurdly heightened stakes suggest that this plot is not (only) to be taken literally.23 So too do the generic conventions of postcolonial national literature, which conventionally take the child as a figure for the young nation—a trope perhaps most visible in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and one that appears in Nigerian guises in more recent novels like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Chris Abani's *Graceland*.24 I read *The Combat*'s interest in the child Isaac as a similar attempt to play with the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, narrating the child’s development as a way of narrating the nation’s. Omotoso introduces the reader to Isaac as the hungry child searches the streets for food, presaging the trope of the starving child; in the background, a news report playing in a shop heralds Biafra's declaration of independence. As the radio announcer proclaims Biafra's birth, Omotoso’s next sentence focuses on Isaac, crouching in the street and eating food he has stolen from a vendor.25 This juxtaposition links Isaac and Biafra from the get-go—a link that is underscored once we learn that both Ojo and Chuku claim Isaac as their own.26

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23 Kole Omotoso, *The Combat*, Modern Classics (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2007), 15-16. In the novel’s first pages, Chuku hears from a newspaper vendor of a coup in Lagos, which has resulted in the deaths of Akintola and the Sardauna. Just a few hours later, another character hears a radio announce that “the military leaders of Nigeria had been meeting in Aburi, Ghana, in an attempt to find a peaceful solution to the problems of the country.” Immediately thereafter, the newscaster announces that “the first shots were being fired” and that Biafra has declared independence. This account of events condenses the events of about eighteen months into a few hours, creating a sense of spiraling crisis that the rest of the novel will replicate.


26 Isaac's paternity is initially unknown, though it later becomes clear that either Ojo or Chuku is the boy's biological father. Neither has had any relationship with the boy up until Chuku runs him over, but both men subsequently claim him as their own.
Given the early link between Isaac and Biafra, we might expect to identify Chuku and Ojo, his ineffectual would-be guardians, with the political leaders Ojukwu and Gowon. Ojo, the avid reader and would-be intellectual, seems an obvious figure for Ojukwu. Chuku, who mutters his disapproval at his friend’s bookishness, reads more easily as a figure for Gowon. Such characterizations echo common media tropes that framed Ojukwu as an intelligent, Oxford-educated leader and Gowon as a bit of a fool—a characterization still evident in recent histories of the war. These tentative early identifications are underscored later in the novel, as word of the conflict spreads and both men turn to outsiders for help. The South Africans and the Russians pledge to arm Ojo and Chuku respectively—just as Russia supported Gowon and South Africa, Ojukwu.

As the novel unfolds, however, it becomes clear that both foreign powers are playing a double game. The South Africans give Ojo live ammunition but a fake gun, while the Soviets provide Chuku with a real gun but dummy bullets. The two combatants, unaware of their allies’ chicanery, continue to parrot South African and Russian talking points to the press. Omotoso thus presents Ojo and Chuku as naive but mostly goodhearted men—they are less martial heroes (or villains) than quarrelsome friends manipulated into escalating a conflict that neither really wants. The true antagonists, Omotoso implies, are the foreign governments who fan a minor conflict into a conflagration, while extracting concessions from the combatants in exchange for dud weapons. Beyond the literal saga of a conflict between two friends, such a reading offers a tale of two political

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28 Omotoso, The Combat, 10.
30 Omotoso, The Combat, 44, 35.
31 Omotoso, The Combat, 47, 52.
leaders outmaneuvered by meddlesome neocolonial governments. As an allegory of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the novel thus highlights the limits on Ojuwku’s and Gowon’s power.

But the turn to figurative reading proves more complex than we might initially suspect. For the identifications sketched above—Ojo as Ojuwku and Chuku as Gowon—might just as easily be reversed. Chuku Debe, after all, is an Igbo name, while Ojo Dada is a Yoruba name—a framing that would suggest reading Chuku as the stand in for Ojukwu and Ojo as the stand in for Gowon. Such disorientations suggest that rather than a one-to-one mapping, Omotoso’s novel develops a set of cross references that allow readers to identify both of the novel’s protagonists alternately with both Gowon and Ojukwu. The flexibility of these identifications suggests a kind of interchangeability between the men, one that enacts formally the critique that is also embedded in the plot: that neither Ojo nor Chuku functions as any kind of father for the suffering child Isaac.

A third level of allegorical reading is mobilized by the name Isaac, freighted as it is with significance in Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Invoking the passage in Genesis in which God demands Abraham demonstrate his faith by sacrificing his beloved son Isaac, Omotoso builds into the novel a densely elaborated tradition of Christian figural reading, in which the Binding of Isaac functions as an allegory of Christ’s sacrifice. Yet while Abraham is celebrated in the Christian tradition for his obedience to God’s will, Isaac’s death in The Combat is a perversion: not a sacrifice but the haphazard result of parental negligence. In this sense, Omotoso’s invocation of Isaac—and,

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34 Origen, Homilies on Genesis and Exodus (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002). See especially Origen’s Homily VIII, which highlights several ways in which the details of the Binding of Isaac prefigure Christ’s sacrifice—including the emphasis on Abraham’s love for Isaac, on the “third day,” and the reference to lamb as a sacrificial offering.
through Isaac, Christ—comments obliquely on the distance between its own hapless heroes and the ideals of Christian action. The parallel between Chuku and Ojo, on the one hand, and Abraham, on the other, can be read as a biting rejoinder to the Biafran state’s frequent invocations of its Christian grounding (as discussed in Chapter One). Whereas the political allegory sketched above highlights the similarities between Ojo and Chuku—and thus seems to offer an equal opportunity critique of Biafran and Nigerian leaders—Omotoso's invocation of Christian iconography moves the novel's critique more forcefully against Biafra's leaders, which so frequently drew on tropes of Christian suffering to argue for the righteousness of the Biafran cause.

As the above paragraphs suggest, the figures of Isaac, Ojo, and Chuku mobilize a range of possible associations and allegorical readings. We might think of these, broadly, as operating at the levels of the political and the religious—but even within those levels, multiple readings are available. Do we read bookish Ojo as Ojukwu, or the Igbo Chuku as Ojukwu? A reader focused on personality might take the former path; a reader focused on ethnicity might take the latter. Another reader might find that the novel is resolutely noncommittal on the question of how to identify the two protagonists: perhaps the very interchangeability of Ojo and Chuku is the point, underscoring the ways in which the two leaders are simply two sides of the same coin. Still another might focus on the invocation of Isaac as a critique of Biafran hypocrisy, claiming Christian virtue while ignoring the suffering of starving children. Some of these readings are in tension with each other; some are complementary. By putting them in motion, _The Combat_ offers an account of allegory rooted in flexible interpretation rather than a dull one-to-one mapping between historical figure and fictional creation. There is, of course, no one way to make sense of the Nigeria-Biafra war. In crafting an allegory that opens up multiple interpretive possibilities, Omotoso invites readers to take on the work of making sense of the war.
In reading allegory as a central mode of aesthetic response to the Biafran war, I offer a slightly different assessment of these novels than does Eleni Coundouriotis—the only other scholar, to my knowledge, who has explored the role of allegory in this body of literature. While Coundouriotis endorses several of the assumptions and implications of Jameson’s argument, she argues that African war novels, far from being necessarily allegorical, expose allegory as an “impossible or deeply inadequate” narrative strategy. She develops this argument in part through a study of Biafran war novels, including some of the same novels that I explore here. Yet this chapter offers a different reading of this body of texts: I argue that allegory, far from being blocked in novels of Biafra, is a crucial representational strategy that allows writers to illuminate the international dimensions of the war. The novels considered in this chapter in fact largely disavow the naturalistic aesthetic that is Coundouriotis’s focus; their interest is less in the details of civilian suffering on the ground and more in the structural view of civil war as a transnational phenomenon.

Part of what accounts for the distance between my reading and Coundouriotis’s is the different texts we consider. All of the writers I examine in this chapter authored their novels at some distance from on-the-ground fighting, and none of them fit easily into the categories ‘Nigerian’ or ‘Biafran.’ Kole Omotoso is Yoruba, from Western Nigeria, now resident in South Africa—and wrote The Combat during his doctoral studies in Edinburgh. Auberon Waugh is English, writing in the UK about a war which he would directly experience only through a brief and well-chaperoned visit to Biafran-held territory. Buchi Emecheta is Igbo—but born in Lagos and writing Destination Biafra in London, where she lived throughout her adult life. All of these writers, in other words, unite a deep interest and investment in the story of the war years with a physical and psychological distance from

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36 Emecheta is an interesting partial exception, torn between realism and allegory.
on-the-ground violence; all three experienced the war primarily through the British media. That does not make their novels any less “war literature” than, for instance, the work of Elechi Amadi or Chinua Achebe, both of whom experienced the war from within the ever-shrinking Biafran state. But it does give us a different perspective on the war, one that is less concerned with naturalistic depictions of violence within Biafra and more invested in exploring the international dimensions of the war. Allegory, with its capacity for multiplicitous connections, is especially well suited to these narratives—narratives that allow, and even invite, readings that operate at multiple levels.

“A Baby Named Biafra”: The Biafra Sun’s Militant Children

This chapter argues that the use of allegories of children as a literary frame for articulating the war grows out of, and responds to, the multivalent depiction of children in newspaper coverage. Before exploring the use of allegory in postwar novels, then, I examine two key ways in which the Biafran state deployed the figure of the child. In photographs that circulated internally in the Biafra Sun, the child was depicted as a youthful and fierce fighter, a hopeful emblem of the would-be state itself. In photographs that circulated internationally, however, the child appeared weak and helpless, frozen in a moment of desperate need. If the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda had had no role in the making of the latter images, we might chalk this difference up to the different choices, biases, and priorities of foreign vs. domestic news organizations. Yet as this chapter will demonstrate, Biafra's well-oiled propaganda arm had a great deal of influence over what foreign correspondents saw and how they represented it to readers and viewers elsewhere. In the first part of this chapter, I track how the image of the child—always fraught with multiple, conflicting meanings—slipped out of Biafran control, shifting from a figure for sovereignty to an emblem of postcolonial despair.

Well before the images of starving children became iconic, the state-run Biafra Sun used rather different images of children to gesture to the young state's promising future. The Biafran babies who
appear in this newspaper before and shortly after Biafran independence are well-fed and well-dressed, the comfortable children of the Eastern elite. They pose in birthday outfits alongside gifts from their loving parents—material goods such as tricycles, cakes, clothing, and in one instance “a new pouffe” for the birthday girl to sit upon (Figs. 1-2). In Fig. 1, for instance, two-year-old Ugochi Ahukannah is depicted enthusiastically pedaling a new tricycle, while two-year-old Osita Odenigbo digs into a plate of chin-chin. The caption notes that Osita’s “many friends and relations were around to rejoice with him.” In Fig. 2, both captions give a sense of ease and plenty: the two children enjoy gifts purchased by their loving parents, including a roasted “fat birthday chicken” over which one-year-old Uchechukwu Okogeri eagerly holds a serving spoon.

Such birthday photographs were common in both Eastern and Western Nigerian papers well before the war; in running photos like the one of little Ugochi and Osita, the Biafra Sun is simply continuing a well-established tradition. A month or so into the conflict, though, the Biafra Sun makes an interesting move: it begins to depict the nascent state’s children as fighters. The captions become more bellicose; the props shift from cakes and toys to machetes and guns. For example, a photograph of two-year-old Geoffrey Ugochuku Ndubeze in August 1967 shows the boy aiming a wooden rifle (Fig. 3). A few days later, the paper ran a birthday photo of four-year-old Chibudoziri Okorie wielding a toy revolver, “ready to join the Liberation march.” On the same page the paper featured an image of one-year-old Ebong Ibanga brandishing a padlock and keys—weapons that the caption notes will be used to lock up Gowon when he “eventually surrender himself to the courageous Biafran soldiers.” Perhaps the most striking example is the August 1967 image of

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37 As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Biafra Sun was the Nigerian Outlook prior to Biafra’s declaration of independence. It independence, the name changed but the format and style remained consistent.
38 See, for instance, the archives of the Nigerian Outlook, West Africa Pilot, Daily Sketch, and Nigerian Tribune for similar photographs throughout the early 1960s.
40 Biafra Sun, August 13 1967, 6.
Emmanuel Onyewuche Ndukwe, who stares fiercely at the camera while holding an adult machete in his right hand (Fig. 4). The caption below the photograph quotes the boy saying, “where is Gowon…I will bring his head to Biafra.” The children—all boys, unsurprisingly—are framed as guarantors of Biafra’s power and virility not (only) in some imagined future of adulthood, but even in the present moment of their childhood. The subtext: even a very young state, a “baby…named Biafra,” is capable of self-defense. The depiction of children as militant defenders of Biafra’s right to self-determination works to set up both the young nation’s strength (even young children are ready to fight Gowon!) and its promise (if Biafra is so powerful in its first months of existence, imagine what the state will accomplish in a few years’ time).

The figure of the militant child is developed further through news articles that emphasize the contributions and military readiness of very young children. In the “Children’s Corner” section of the July 22, 1967 paper—which typically includes puzzles, stories, and letters—the editor includes a letter from a child writing in praise of the war. Echoing typical anti-Northern language, the boy asserts that he is “ready to fight and die even, instead of being a slave to Hausa vandals.” Articles written from an adult perspective also frequently endorse the figure of the militant child—sometimes in strikingly violent terms. For example, in a piece titled “Even Kids Are Ready,” the writer opines that there is “none too small” for the important task of defending Biafra (Fig. 5). The accompanying photo depicts a young child in military dress, saluting. The writer asserts that the child “has sworn to bring back ten heads of Nigerian soldiers”—thus fulfilling one of Ojukwu’s widely quoted commands to his troops at the war’s start. “His age,” the piece concludes, “can be no hindrance now.” Much the same, we are to infer, could be said for Biafra.

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41 For example, see “Four-Year-Old Child Aids CDF Effort,” Biafra Sun, August 7, 1967, 8 and “Even Kids Are Ready,” Biafra Sun, July 16, 1967, 8.
Nothing comparable appears in the Nigerian press during the war years. Editors of papers like the *Nigerian Tribune*, *Daily Sketch*, and *West African Pilot* do print birthday pictures of children both before and during the war, but these images never become militarized in the way that the Biafran images do. The reasons for this are relatively easy to imagine: Nigeria had a professional army and did not need to mobilize its civilian population in the way that Biafra did. Both sides could also anticipate that the fighting would be concentrated in and around the former Eastern Region, and that it would therefore affect the civilian population of Biafra to a greater degree than the civilian population of Nigeria. As such, the Biafran state had a practical investment in devoting significant resources to inculcating in the civilian population an expectation of total war and the belief that all Biafrans—women and children included—had a critical role to play in battling Northern aggression. In this context, preparing the population for mass mobilization was a savvy and (as it turned out) prescient strategy.

My archival research has not turned up any instances in which the figure of the militant child appears in the international press, or indeed anywhere beyond Biafra-based newspapers that target a Biafran readership. It was a significant trope throughout the first few months of the war, but became less powerful within Biafra as the war continued and both the nascent state and her flesh-and-blood children suffered and shrank. Printing of the Enugu-based *Biafra Sun* was disrupted after the capital fell to Nigerian troops in October 1967; though it resumed in the new capital Umuahia, the paper would have to move again when Umuahia fell in April 1969. In the meantime, production was compounded by practical difficulties: a lack of access to both paper and ink limited the production of all Biafran newspapers as the war ground on. The *Biafra Sun* reduced its paper size in September, and by the end of October had stopped printing photographs entirely.

Coverage was also affected by a shakeup in the larger propaganda operation, precipitated by the military losses in September and October of 1967. In the first months of the war, propaganda
had been the responsibility of the Ministry of Information. After the loss of Enugu, Ojukwu created a new Directorate of Propaganda with a staff of over two hundred (including many former faculty from the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, which had fallen to Federal forces in July). Thus began what one participant called "the golden age of Biafran propaganda." The Ministry of Information had, in the first few months of the war, emphasized Biafra's strength and suggested that the young state would easily turn back an undisciplined Nigerian army. By October and November 1967, that tack was no longer viable. Instead, the Directorate deftly switched gears, beginning instead to emphasize Biafrans' determination to fight on against all odds. From late 1967 through early 1968, much of this effort was focused on convincing the Biafran population to continue the fight regardless of the hardships that Nigeria's economic blockade was increasingly imposing. Ultimately, the image of the militant child became a casualty of this shift in focus—replaced, in the page of the *Biafra Sun*, by a growing focus on Nigeria's purported genocidal intentions, the threat of saboteurs within Biafra, and an insistence that only a sovereign Biafran state would secure the safety of men, women, and children in the East. The symbol of the militant child thus represents an early experiment in cultivating national sentiment by a Biafran leadership not yet cognizant of the devastation the war would wreck upon Biafran civilians. Yet, as I discuss in the next section, the Biafran government was ultimately able to repurpose the image of the child to reach an audience beyond Biafra's borders—an achievement that speaks to both Biafra's capable propaganda machine and the powerful and flexible symbolism of the child.

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“Where Children Wait to Die”: Biafra as International Media Event

Once it became clear to the Biafran leadership that the war would not be settled in a matter of months, the young state increasingly prioritized foreign recognition and assistance. In the first months of 1968, Biafra focused on both cultivating support within Africa and on working to reach a British and European audience. Key elements of the latter project were the Overseas Press Service, the section of the Directorate of Propaganda that attempted to shape foreign news coverage, and Markpress, the Swiss public relations firm that the Biafran government hired to be its European face. From January 1968 through January 1970, the Overseas Press Service wrote over seven hundred press releases—roughly one per day—which it telexed to Markpress for distribution to thousands of journalists, British MPs, church leaders, public intellectuals, and activists. This early public relations blitz had three main themes: that Biafrans were facing Nigerian genocide, that the conflict was a religious war between the Muslim north and Christian Biafra, and that the conflict was an attempt to steal Biafra's oil. These early narratives got limited traction in the British media during the war's first year, though the genocide claims would feature heavily in later reporting. A handful of British journalists covered the war in the early months of 1968, but most of the writing from Biafra during this time was the work not of professional journalists but of Catholic missionaries—particularly the Irish Holy Ghost Fathers—several hundred of whom stayed in their

45 On Biafra’s push for recognition by African states, see Chapter 5 of Stremlau’s International Politics (131-141). In April and May 1968, Biafra was recognized as a state by Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia.
46 From January 1968, the Overseas Press Service was headed by the novelist and journalist Cyprian Ekwensi.
49 Frederick Forsyth, The Biafra Story, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015003698944, 222-3. In April, correspondents from the Times, Daily Express, Guardian, and Daily Telegraph all covered the Nigerian bombing of Aba. The Sunday Times also featured a long article about the Biafran army written by Forsyth in mid-May 1968. These accounts did not produce a dramatic uptick in interest among the British public, but they did remind readers that, nearly a year after it had begun, the war continued.
parishes in Igboland through the war.\textsuperscript{50} The circulation of these writings through church networks and publications like \textit{Catholic News Service} mobilized both Catholic and Protestant leaders to begin working to get humanitarian aid past the Nigerian blockade.\textsuperscript{51}

The Biafran government succeeded in breaking through to mainstream British public opinion almost by accident in June 1968. By this time, Biafra had been struggling with famine for months, largely due to Nigeria’s blockade.\textsuperscript{52} However, the news had received very limited attention beyond Catholic missionary circles; fearful of looking weak, the Biafran government worked to bring in humanitarian aid without disclosing the extent of civilian suffering. Michael Leapman, correspondent for the British \textit{Sun} (not yet the tabloid it would become), encountered the typical Biafran line during a reporting trip in June 1968: "they were resisting Nigeria, they were surviving independently, everything was fine, they were winning the war, etcetera."\textsuperscript{53} When Leapman visited an Irish missionary hospital, however, he and a photographer colleague were able to capture what Leapman later called "marvelous pictures of kids in great distress."\textsuperscript{54}

The \textit{Sun} published those images on June 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1968 alongside front-page features titled “Land of No Hope” and “Biafra: Where Children Wait to Die” (Fig. 7). The above-the-fold photograph showed a white British doctor, Anna Jackson, holding a child dying of hunger (Fig. 12). A second image featured an emaciated child sitting on the floor under a cot, looking toward the viewer, alongside a caption reading “Two cups of milk in a fortnight” (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{55} The shocking images

\textsuperscript{50} Stremlau, \textit{The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970}, 119.


\textsuperscript{52} Forsyth, \textit{The Biafra Story}, 176-79. Also significant was the fall of the area along the Cross River (the southeast part of Biafra) which had traditionally been the most fertile agricultural region of Eastern Nigeria. Nigerian military victories in this area in April 1968, combined with the fall of Port Harcourt in May, meant that the remaining Biafran territory (the Igbo heartland) was flooded with millions of refugees from the south and east—and simultaneously deprived of agricultural production from that region.


\textsuperscript{54} Quoted in Harrison and Palmer, \textit{News out of Africa}, 29.

garnered widespread attention in the UK; journalist Michael Leapman was interviewed on BBC4 the day after the story broke, just an hour before British MPs were set to debate military support for the Nigerian government in the House of Commons. During that debate, some MPs explicitly cited the *Sun*’s report, arguing that if British support for Nigeria enabled the mass starvation of infants, such support could no longer be justified.\(^56\) As fellow-reporter (and later novelist) Frederick Forsyth recalls, the *Sun* report shocked the British public and, for the first time, brought "Biafra" to the consciousness of those with little knowledge of West Africa:

Nobody in this country at that time had ever seen children looking like that. The last time the Brits had seen anything like that must have been the Belsen pictures...Those first few pictures did it. There was suddenly a tidal wave of applications from Fleet Street to the little office the Biafrans maintained in London for space on a plane, for access. ...The war itself would never have set the Thames on fire, but the pictures of starving children put Biafra on to the front page of every British newspaper and from there to newspapers all over the world. People who couldn't fathom the political complexities of the war could easily grasp the wrong in a picture of a child dying of starvation.\(^57\)

The generic consistency of these images is worth noting. All of the photographs center children, typically toddlers or infants. The children's bodies are marked with visible signs of kwashiorkor protein deficiency: ballooning bellies, stick-like arms and legs, hair faded to white or red, heads that appear enormous in relation to emaciated bodies. The children often face the camera, as if appealing to the viewer (Figs. 8-11). If adults appear at all, they are typically either white caretakers, often missionaries (Fig. 12) or equally emaciated mothers, whose suffering and grief are presented as part and parcel of their children's agony (Fig. 13). Such imagery came to effectively constitute “Biafra” as media event for many Europeans and Americans. In a striking demonstration of this elision, an Oxfam staffer visiting Biafra in 1968 wrote to a colleague that the children he

\(^{56}\) Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism*, 113.

observed “virtually all look like Oxfam posters.” No longer does the imagery represent the children; now the children are seen as representing the imagery. Today, when images of children—and especially African children—have becomes “the paramount icon of humanitarian distress” such images may look familiar, even cliched. But at the time, these images were new to most British observers, and they were shocking. For a brief moment, "Biafra" captured the British public's attention.

The Biafran government recognized the sudden uptick of British attention as a rare opportunity. British journalists had filed reports from Biafra since the war began in July 1967, but no earlier story had captured British public attention in a sustained way. As Patrick Ediomi Davies of the Biafran Propaganda Secretariat later reflected, the imagery of starvation proved to be a "watershed" in the effort to woo foreign support:

Biafra realised that this was an angle they could play on. It had tried the political emancipation of oppressed people, it had tried the religious angle, it had tried pogrom and genocide—these had limited successes—but the pictures of starving children and women, dying children, children with kwashioror stomachs touched everybody, it cut across the range of people's beliefs.

The reports in the British press marked the start of a dramatic uptick in news coverage of Biafra—first in the UK, but then US and European newspapers as well. Mentions of Biafra in the international press spiked in summer 1968, peaking in August. The spike in news coverage coincided with the highest rates of starvation—in part because famine is newsworthy, but also because most journalists flew into Biafra via humanitarian airlift; with more Joint Church Aid planes

58 Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 146.
59 Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 141.
60 Quoted in Alex De Waal, Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 74.
61 Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 121. While international coverage of the war ebbed and flowed over the next year and a half, Biafra appeared in international newspapers at consistently higher levels than it had prior to the onset of mass starvation.
in the air, there were more chances to get to Biafra and report.\textsuperscript{62} Indeed, reporting on Biafra relied to a striking degree on cooperation among journalists, the Biafran state, missionaries, and the broader aid operation. Foreign journalists relied heavily on propaganda-heavy Radio Biafra and the good graces of the Biafran government. As \textit{Observer} reporter Colin Legum noted, "The Biafrans stole a march by flying in everybody who wanted to come and taking them up and showing them everything."\textsuperscript{63} Frederick Forsyth—whose pro-Biafra sympathies were widely known—recalled that Ojukwu offered him lodging, petrol vouchers, the use of a Volkswagen Beetle, and freedom to travel across Biafran-held territory.\textsuperscript{64} The Nigerian government, in contrast, were "defensive, secretive, and formal," and kept a tight leash on the press.\textsuperscript{65} Lagos-based foreign journalists could occasionally squeeze information out of the military, but the national government offered few briefings and totally refused access to any journalist who had previously reported from within Biafra. This stance effectively forced journalists to choose between reporting from Nigerian or Biafran territory; given the Biafran leadership's greater openness (and the fact that most of the fighting happened within Biafran territory), foreign journalists generally preferred the latter. As a result, many of the mainstream British newspapers tended to prioritize Biafran views over Nigerian views.\textsuperscript{66} So while the imagery of starving children was not how the Biafran government had initially framed itself, it soon became the primary paradigm through which people outside of Nigeria viewed the conflict.

\textsuperscript{62} Heerten, \textit{The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism}, 118.
\textsuperscript{63} Quoted in Harrison and Palmer, \textit{News out of Africa}, 25.
\textsuperscript{64} Harrison and Palmer, \textit{News out of Africa}, 25.
\textsuperscript{65} Harrison and Palmer, \textit{News out of Africa}, 24.
\textsuperscript{66} Akinwande Bolaji Akinyemi, "The British Press and the Nigerian Civil War," \textit{African Affairs} 71, no. 285 (1972): 408–26. Akinyemi identifies the \textit{Observer} as generally impartial, and criticizes the \textit{Guardian}, \textit{Times}, \textit{Financial Times}, and \textit{Telegraph} for pro-Biafra bias. See also Heerten, \textit{The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism}, 112. Heerten identifies the \textit{Spectator} as the most “candidly” pro-Biafran British paper, but notes that such bias was “indicative of a general trend.” (The \textit{Spectator}'s pro-Biafra slant owes a great deal to Auberon Waugh, the focus of the next section of this chapter.) There is an important distinction here between the generally pro-Biafra British newspapers and the more impartial BBC. While the \textit{Biafra Sun} often reported approvingly on articles from the British newspapers, it repeatedly excoriated what it saw as the BBC’s pro-Nigeria coverage of the war. (Nigeria, in turn, criticized the BBC for what it saw as its pro-Biafra coverage.)
Humanitarian and activist groups deployed these images effectively to drum up interest and motivate viewers to donate to relief funds. One key tactic was the direct address to the reader or viewer (Figs. 14-15). A pamphlet for the British group Biafran Babies Appeal, for example, depicts a photo of a starving child alongside text that implicates the viewer: “This Boy Died Only an Hour after the Picture Was Taken… Don’t Let More Die.”67 When such appeals spread beyond Britain, as they did later in 1968, similar rhetorical moves prevailed. “Have you ever seen millions of children starving to death?” asks one poster soliciting donations for the American Jewish Committee (Fig. 15). “Now you have,” concludes the poster—which then goes on to ask the reader to send money for Biafran relief. “A massive sea and air lift of food and medicine [is] possible…but only with your help.”68 Such pamphlets articulate a direct connection between starving Biafran children and the foreign reader: if you act, this child may live. If not, she dies. In positioning the viewer as the adult savior to Biafra’s suffering children, the images set up a two-fold hierarchy: the adult helps the child, the person with resources helps the person in need. So although the activist imagery effectively mobilized British empathy, the focus on starving children grounded that empathy in pity rather than solidarity, hierarchy rather than equality.

Such imagery positions Biafra not as a promising young state, ready to take its place on the world stage, but as a “land of no hope”—a benighted land in which such tragedies are, perhaps, natural. Biafra becomes a symbol of a foreclosed future, a state cut off from the narrative of development that might lead it to become a full-fledged member of the international community. In contrast to the Biafra Sun’s figure of the militant child, the starving child shows no agency, no initiative, no capacity for self-defense or self-determination. Biafra thus became an inaugural

67 Susan Garth, Biafran Babies’ Appeal, 1968.
68 Quoted in Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 145.
moment in a reconceptualization of the "Third World" that would continue throughout the 1970s, as Joseph Slaughter describes:

...the Third World went from being a historical subject with inspiring aspirations for “a novel world order committed to human rights, self-determination, and world peace” to becoming a discursive object of pity in need of Western care—a problem and raison d’être for the new humanitarianism.69

The deepest irony is that the Biafran government itself contributed to solidifying this shift. By directing international journalists toward the "starving children" story and amplifying such imagery via Markpress and activist allies in the UK, the Directorate of Propaganda helped to solidify the link between starving children and would-be state.70 The tactic worked to dramatically increase news coverage of Biafra in the UK, but in the process it recast a struggle for self-determination as a humanitarian crisis, normalizing Third World sovereignty as a space of humanitarian intervention. A symbol that the Biafran state had helped craft ultimately became, for many foreign viewers, the war’s single story.

Empathy from Afar: Allegory and Satire in Auberon Waugh’s A Bed of Flowers

After the war, numerous novels took this efflorescence of international media attention as a primary focus. I turn now to two of these novels, Auberon Waugh’s A Bed of Flowers and Buchi Emecheta’s Destination Biafra. Though quite different in background and style, both Waugh and Emecheta are centrally concerned with how the war was represented to those who experienced it

70 Many pamphlets originally published by the Biafran government were subsequently published and circulated in the UK under the auspices of the Britain-Biafra association. Similarly, the near-daily press releases disseminated in Europe by Markpress were written in Biafra by Biafran employees of the Directorate of Propaganda.
from afar. Like *The Combat*, both of these novels respond formally to the trope of the starving child by incorporating the figure of the child in a very different way: not as a naturalistic depiction of Biafran suffering but as an allegory that points to the unsavory intervention of British political interests. Waugh’s novel offers a particularly clear instance of this shift—foregrounding the limits of contemporaneous news coverage in the UK, and affording Biafra symbolic recognition as a member of the international community.

A novelist, columnist, and sharp-tongued critic, Auberon Waugh was described in one obituary as "the most verbally brutal journalist of his age." He began writing novels in the early 1960s, though he would eventually abandon fiction in favor of journalism (perhaps to avoid the inevitable comparisons to his father Evelyn). By the late 1960s, he had a regular political column for the *Spectator*; beginning in July 1968, Biafra was a frequent topic of that column. Waugh was an unapologetic partisan, a member of the activist Britain-Biafra association and co-author (with Suzanne Cronjé) of *Biafra: Britain's Shame* (1969). He was particularly appalled by British military support for the Nigerian government, and, in his trademark acerbic style, he made the critique felt:

> For as long as any Christian, liberal, or humanitarian tradition survives, the year 1968 will be remembered as the one in which a British government, for the first time in its history, was prepared to condone the mass starvation to death of innocent civilians as a means of implementing one aspect of its peacetime foreign policy. Very few people in England have any awareness of the fact—like most Germans after the war, they will be able to say that they did not know what was being done in their name. Although photographs of the atrocities being perpetrated in Biafra have appeared in most newspapers the general impression given by the captions and news coverage is that they children are starving to death as the result of a famine brought about by the war. Not a single newspaper has seen fit to point out that the children are dying as the direct and intended result of a siege which is supported by the British government, by the official opposition party, and by very nearly every Commonwealth correspondent in Fleet Street.

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71 Both novelists lived in London during the war years.
The problem of a complacent, and complicit, British citizenry would form the major plot *A Bed of Flowers* (1972), Waugh’s final novel. The novel is set in England in the late 1960s and follows a group of amiable misfits who attempt to escape the deadening confines of contemporary society and build a better, gentler community. One idealist among them is Jacques, an ex-priest who had previously served a parish in Nsukka. Through his attention to the spiraling situation in Nigeria—and with the help of television news—the others gradually become aware of ongoing anti-Eastern massacres across the North. A great deal of the subsequent plot revolves around their well-intentioned and ineffectual efforts to help the suffering Nigerians. A subplot, meanwhile, tracks the efforts of nefarious British business interests to fund the genocidal Federal government. Although the tone is often comic, Waugh makes clear that the stakes are high: in a column about the novel, he describes the Labour government's Nigeria policy as representing—in art and presumably also in life—"unmistakable evil."

Perhaps because of Waugh’s strong sympathies combined with his distance from the conflict itself, *A Bed of Flowers* is singularly preoccupied with the problem of how to help from a distance. All of the novel’s main characters spend the course of the war in the English countryside and learn much of what they know via the news media. Yet understanding the war from afar is no easy task, and Waugh bitterly satirizes both the stereotyped television coverage and the commune dwellers’ grotesque misunderstandings.

One day in September 1966, for instance, the residents of Williams Farm see graphic images from Nigeria flash across the TV screen:

> Quite suddenly, the screen had filled with running, screaming Negroes. There was a noise of shots and further screams. The camera showed bodies and parts of bodies, hideously mutilated, lying on the ground.

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74 Most of the novel is set in 1966, prior to Biafra’s declaration of independence.
"What is going on?" said Beauty. "Is this some sort of tribal custom? Why do they suddenly have to get so completely out of hand?"

"It is a tribal custom," said Black Stone, who knew everything. "Some sort of harvest festival. They're celebrating the fertility goddess."

"Rubbish," said Jacques. "They're massacring all my friends from the Eastern region." 76

This persistent misreading has a couple of sources, Waugh suggests. One is the commune dwellers’ preconceptions—their own enthusiasm for a “back-to-the-land” movement combined with romantic assumptions about so-called primitive cultures. Another is the “cruel” and “condescending” commentary by the news anchor, ostensibly an expert on West Africa. 77 Rather than explicating the causes and likely consequences of such violence, the commentator suggests snidely that massacres are to be expected in Africa when "any tribe...tries to get just that little bit above itself." 78 Only Jacques, who has lived and worked in Nigeria, is able to recognize both the nature of the violence (a mass killing targeting Easterners), and the specific cities in which it is taking place. It is his knowledge of Nigerian politics and his familiarity with Jos and Kano specifically that allow him to correctly interpret what is happening on screen. Images, Waugh implies, do not speak for themselves.

_A Bed of Flowers_ is equally dubious about the link between recognizing suffering and acting effectively to alleviate it—the link on which so much of the pro-Biafran activist propaganda relies. For though the commune dwellers do come to understand that what they are watching on TV is not a celebratory ritual but a massacre, that knowledge does not enable them to take any meaningful action. They _want_ to help, certainly, but they don’t know how: “The only thing we can do for Jacques' friends in West Africa," they conclude, "is to think about them." 79 This thinking—and the mourning that it provokes—occupies a great deal of the novel, and Waugh bitterly mocks this passive grief:

77 Waugh, _A Bed of Flowers_, 156.
78 Waugh, _A Bed of Flowers_, 156.
79 Waugh, _A Bed of Flowers_, 158.
All twelve of them sat round the kitchen table thinking of those dead babies...Occasionally, one of them would give a little whoop of astonishment as realization dawned anew. Buttercup wept openly, her tears splashing from her chin..."But we can't sit around weeping for all the babies who die in Nigeria," cried the Duke..."What good is this doing to the Nigerians?"80

The commune dwellers sit in sadness a bit longer, cry a bit more, and then move on to smoking and laughing at each other. The disturbing media coverage they see every day _does_ stir up empathy—but they remain unable to channel that empathy in any productive direction. With time, it dissipates.

Waugh's depiction of the commune dwellers' passive grief develops, over the course of the novel, into a sharp critique of empathic identification—a challenge to the pro-Biafran activist movement of which he was so vocal a member. When the commune dwellers finally do dream up a plan to send aid to the starving children, the goods they gather are farcically mismatched to the severity of the problem: tea cosies, table mats, marmalade, and a magical wheel.81 These are goods that the donors enjoy, goods important to their own lives on Williams Farm—but not, presumably, goods that will be useful to anyone in Nigeria. (In fact, it's not clear that the odd assortment of gifts ever actually makes it into the mail.) Waugh’s critique of the imagery of suffering thus identifies two distinct problems. First, images are liable to misrepresentation and misinterpretation—particularly by those without much background knowledge. Second, even when those images do successfully communicate something real about faraway suffering, spectators may not have the knowledge, power or capacity to intervene in a helpful way. (And worse, they may not have the self-awareness to recognize that they do not have the capacity to intervene meaningfully!) _A Bed of Flowers_ is thus

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80 Waugh, _A Bed of Flowers_, 103. This part of the novel is still set prior to Biafra’s declaration of Independence—thus the characters’ references to Nigeria rather than to Biafra. It is particularly striking, then, that Waugh frames the commune dwellers’ emotions as a response to suffering “babies” in particular. Images of children did not become part of the international iconography of the war until the summer of 1968, well after _A Bed of Flowers_ is set.

81 Waugh, _A Bed of Flowers_, 218.
doubly skeptical about the power of the press—and of visual imagery in particular—to drive meaningful activism by British citizens with no direct connection to the war.

So Waugh, too, turns to allegory—repurposing the figure of the child in order to highlight not individual suffering, but international connections among Biafra, Nigeria, and the UK. As in Omotoso’s *The Combat*, the child stands in for the would-be nation—not an object of pity or empathy, but a figure that allows the reader to better understand the structural relations among the many international players with a hand in this war. And to an even greater extent than Omotoso’s, Waugh’s allegorical child maps neatly on to the “baby…named Biafra” that is the nascent state. For in the final third of *A Bed of Flowers*, the character Rosalind becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy develops alongside Eastern Nigeria’s push towards independence, and she ultimately gives birth the following spring, on May 30th 1967—the very date that Eastern Nigeria declares itself the Republic of Biafra. As if the parallel is not clear enough, Rosalind names her baby "Biafra Sunshine Ojukwu:" Biafra for the newborn state, "Sunshine" for its symbol, the rising sun, and "Ojukwu" for its leader.

This move frames the reader’s understanding of the nascent state’s trajectory as dependent, in part, on the community in which it "grows up." *A Bed of Flowers* is a novel preoccupied with the idea of family; it asserts the necessity of developing within a community of care and support. Most of the novel’s central characters are struggling in some ways with their blood relations—two are estranged from their brothers; another from a father; another from an uncle. The novel’s melancholic truth-teller, the ex-priest Jacques, insists that those without families must create new families, for "a man without family or village is already halfway insane.” (*Look at America,* he

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83 As readers may have inferred from the character names I have mentioned, *A Bed of Flowers* is an unsubtle retelling of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. I address this point below.
84 Waugh also named one of his own children after Biafra: his youngest child, Nathaniel Thomas Biafra Waugh, was born in 1968. This biographical detail suggests a core seriousness in Waugh’s depiction of Biafra Sunshine Ojukwu, despite the rather florid name.
adds.) Indeed, a key part of what Waugh depicts at Williams Farm is the creation of a family. At the most literal level, Orlando and Rosalind marry and have a child, creating a new nuclear family without the tensions of the families they’ve fled. But more importantly, Waugh repeatedly refers to the whole motley crew of commune dwellers as "the family." This unconventional family provides just the sort of care that the little baby Biafra needs: the child grows up "beautiful, intelligent, and thoroughly pleasant."

By emphasizing the family's role in bringing up baby, Waugh suggests that a central aspect of Biafra-the-state's future hinges on the family in which it is born: the family of nations, or international society. Indeed, the commune dwellers at Williams Farm, attentive to the importance of family, flag precisely this issue. When the group first begins to discuss the possibility that Biafra (the state) will declare independence, Beauty cries that Biafra will “scarcely last very long if it has Nigeria and Britain and America against it.” Russia too, another character points out. "Everybody seems to have it in for her," Beauty cries. "Biafra won't stand a chance." The reader of Waugh's novel knows this to be true, for the novel also features a nasty set of British businessmen and politicians intent on undermining Biafra in order to protect British investments in Nigeria. Indeed, the policy of blockading Biafra—and thus inducing the famine that leads to the starvation of so many children—originates (in the novel) with one Titus Burns-Oates, an unpleasant minor bureaucrat in Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In Waugh's telling, it is precisely Biafra's (lack of) position in international society that dooms the fledgling nation. This larger structural view of the conflict highlights the de facto limits on Biafran power while taking seriously the status of the nation as an (admittedly young) member of the international community.

86 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 137.
87 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 251.
88 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 217.
89 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 217.
90 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 205.
In a contemporaneous discussion of his own novel, Waugh insisted, unconvincingly, that "the book ends happily and is intended to provide a happy and enjoyable day's reading."\(^9\) Certainly, the account of baby Biafra seems to offer a kind of fairy-tale closure—yet that promise is undercut in the novel's final page as we depart the gauzy world of Williams Farm and re-enter the social scene with which the novel opens. The novel's first pages are set in 1966 at an election night party at the home of a well-connected BBC journalist. The guests, pleased to ring in the election of a new Labour government, nibble bacon-and-pineapple hors d'oeuvres and quietly appraise each others' connections. A senior executive sips champagne and opines blandly that the new majority ought to "do something about privilege."\(^9\) Everyone present crowds around the host's new color television and piously expresses their desire to see a new government "where moral consideration counted for something."\(^9\) This is the world from which Williams Farm represents an escape: a world of petty hypocrisy, consumerism, and loosely held convictions. Orlando and Rosalind and the others seek to build something different.

Yet by the novel's end, this larger social structure remains devastatingly intact. Waugh's epilogue is set in 1970—four years after the main action of the plot—and returns to the same Notting Hill home, the same cast of well-to-do journalists watching election returns, the same political hypocrisy. Labour has been voted out and the Conservatives are in, but the group's "traditional English obsequiousness" endures.\(^9\) Indeed, the only change of note to the partygoers is the arrival of a newcomer, an official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office whose star had risen over the past four years as he stewarded Britain's Nigeria policy through a series of "awkward

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92 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 14.
94 Waugh, A Bed of Flowers, 252.
moments." It is our old friend Titus Burns-Oates—now 'Sir' rather than 'Mr.' Much of the brief epilogue inhabits Burns-Oates' thoughts as he reflects on recent dust-ups with conscience-ridden colleagues. "Of course, it had never been his intention to exterminate the entire Ibo race," he muses irritably. "Even now the accusation made him angry." If the novel's very first page had hinted at certain "disreputable truths...about England's recent history," the epilogue demonstrates how little those truths disturb the comfortable lives of those most likely to write that history.

The novel's circular structure means that the gently hopeful saga of Williams Farm is neatly bookended by nearly identical scenes of political self-interest, a framing that forcefully limits the reach of Waugh's pastoral romance. As in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (on which *A Bed of Flowers* is loosely based) the "green world" of the forest permits a playful and imaginative escape from reality. That space of possibility, however, is ultimately contained by a return to the city, and established social norms, at the story's end. As the framing device of the two election parties suggests, all the goings-on at Williams Farm between 1966 and 1970 have had no impact whatsoever on the much-lamented British policy of support for Nigeria. Although the reader was promised, at the novel's end, that the child Biafra would grow up "beautiful, intelligent, and thoroughly pleasant," the epilogue forces us to revise that happy expectation. "Biafra was dead" Waugh writes, "at a cost of about two million lives, mostly children." Here we finally run up against the limits of the allegory that animates the bulk of the novel. The dream of a baby Biafra who grows up to live happily ever after is just that, a beautiful work of imagination, critiquing but never really changing the rough-and-tumble world of politics. Despite its satirical wrapping, that is, *A Bed of Flowers* is ultimately an

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elegiac novel, mourning the failure of Biafra and insisting—via allegory—that it could have been otherwise.

**Up Close at a Distance: Ambivalent Allegory in Buchi Emecheta’s Destination Biafra**

The final part of this chapter turns to an allegory that is both more flexible and more ambivalent than *A Bed of Flowers*: Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), which recounts the war as a tale of both international politicking and civilian suffering through the eyes of an upper-class Nigerian woman. Born in Lagos to an Igbo family, Emecheta emigrated to London in 1962 and lived there for the rest of her life. *Destination Biafra*, her sixth novel, is notable for its sustained focus on gendered experiences of war and its depiction of the conflict's political antecedents. The novel focuses on the experiences of Debbie Ogedembge, privileged daughter of a wealthy minister. After her father is killed in a coup and her mother flees to England, Debbie resolves to join the Nigerian army and attempt to bring peace to her beloved homeland. She ultimately travels from Lagos to the East in a vain attempt to negotiate a peace deal; along the way, she survives hunger, violence, and rape. In contrast to Waugh’s distant lens, Emecheta focuses closely on the day-to-day suffering of civilians. The novel depicts massacres and other war crimes committed by both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers. She also—and this is a point of contact with Waugh—emphasizes Britain’s role in fueling the conflict through the figure of Alan Grey, a British arms trafficker and Debbie’s sometime boyfriend. The novel ends with the waste of the war and Debbie’s recognition of Britain's pervasive neocolonial influence on both Biafra and Nigeria.

*Destination Biafra* has received less critical attention than many of Emecheta's other works; the attention it has received has often been negative. One of the challenges the novel presents to

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readers is its stylistic diversity and tonal shifts, moving as it does from allegory to realism to
(occasionally) melodrama. As Hugh Hodges notes, Destination Biafra is driven by “two competing
and incompatible impulses,” allegory and realism.102 On the one hand, the novel uses allegorical
children—sickly or deformed—to identify the failures of both Nigeria and Biafra. On the other
hand, the novel is packed with characters who are not allegorical at all, who are in fact thinly veiled
versions of actual historical figures. Emecheta’s depiction of the leaders of Biafra and Nigeria has
none of the ambiguity of Omotoso’s Chuku and Ojo; here, her ’Chijioke Abosi’ is clearly Ojuwku;
her 'Saka Momoh’ is obviously Gowon. Nor is it only the primary leaders who populate the novel’s
pages; readers of Destination Biafra can pick out fictional analogues for a veritable parliament of
politicians, including Azikiwe, Balewa, Bello, Awolowo, Akintola, Mbadie, Aguiyi-Ironsi, and
numerous others.103 This impulse towards historical documentation creates an instability in the
novel, a tug-of-war between realism and allegory. As Hodges observes, the “desire to connect the
text straightforwardly to its historical referents—to say “this actually happened”—is deeply at odds
with its allegorical nature.”104

I think that Hodges is right here: the tension between realism and allegory is a central anxiety
in the book. But I read the nature of that anxiety somewhat differently—not as a flaw but as a clue
that alerts us to the ways in which the Biafran experience was flattened out in mainstream British
media. Like Omotoso, Emecheta figures Biafra as a child with multiple possible parents, giving
readers a choice about how to conceptualize the young state: a child of Nigerian leader Gowon?

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child of Biafran leader Ojukwu? Or a child of the Biafran people, of the war-ravaged civilian population rather than the elite political class? Destination Biafra puts all of these ideas into motion. As the protagonist Debbie moves from the halls of power to the war-ravaged Biafran countryside, Emecheta’s documentary attention to the people’s suffering would seem to suggest that here, among the ragged refugees, is where Biafra will truly be born.

The novel’s ending, however, complicates any straightforward reading of its allegorical children. Debbie ultimately travels to the UK to mobilize activists there, photographs of suffering children in tow. Her attitude towards these images is complex. On the one hand, she affirms their veracity; the suffering they document, she insists, is real. At the same time, she resists crystallizing the whole Biafra story into the figure of the suffering child. Destination Biafra ultimately turns back to that larger allegory and away from the symbol of the child, figuring Debbie herself as an allegory for the dream of Biafra. Ultimately, the novel’s vision for Biafra is not self-determination in the political sense but moral growth, an internal movement to purify a Nigeria corrupted by greed and tribalism. It’s a kind of sublimation of Biafra's revolutionary energy—and an insistence that the most important figure in the novel is not the child but the adult woman.

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While the novel is sympathetic to Biafra as an ideal (thus the title), Emecheta is cynical about both leaders. For her, "Biafra" names a political ideal—freedom from corruption, exploitation, and neocolonialism—rather than a nation-state. In a striking scene in the novel's early part, Emecheta places both Abosi and Momoh among the officers planning the January 1966 coup. Momoh frames the goals of the coup: "a new Nigeria," free of corruption, poverty, and violence. 105 "What name

would you give this new nation?" asks Abosi. Talk turns to the "old lost kingdoms of west Africa," and "Biafra" is mooted as a potential name for the nation formerly known as Nigeria. One of the other plotters laughingly promises that their coup will be "in the name of a new and happy country called Biafra." Abosi replies gravely that he would rather say "our destination is 'Biafra,"' since in his view the nation is not yet fully free of Britain's pernicious influence. Historically speaking, this scene is set nearly a year and a half prior to the East's declaration of independence, and there is no evidence that any officers involved in the 1966 coup ever used the term "Biafra" to articulate their vision for Nigeria. By inserting this scene, Emecheta articulates a vision of Biafra rooted not in regional, religious, or ethnic identity but in a common commitment to development and democracy; "Biafra" names the end of neocolonialism and the birth of "our real freedom" in a purified Nigeria. So when Abosi and Momoh fall out and war begins—and then wears on, and on—Debbie begins to fear that this shared vision is threatened by the two men's greed and self-interest.

The novel develops its critique of both Abosi and Momoh through allegories of failed reproduction: both men are unable to father a viable child. Early in the novel, Abosi (read: Ojukwu) marries Julianna, his beautiful and accomplished barrister fiancé. Though Julianna already has a healthy daughter from a previous marriage, she and Abosi struggle to have a child together. Julianna suffers repeated miscarriages, a "private unhappiness" that Emecheta frames as symbolic of the larger public failure to create a viable Biafran state. Emecheta sets up this parallel by threading together the accounts of Julianna's miscarriage and Abosi's preparation for Aburi. After Abosi assures his wife that "Aburi will set everything right," Emecheta switches from a third person narration focalized through Abosi to a narration focalized through Julianna: “His wife, knowing the

106 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 60.
107 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 119.
108 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 160.
109 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 97.
private unhappiness that hovered over their marriage, felt the more sorry for him.”10 Abosi spends the day in frustrating political meetings, returning home to find his wife fearful and in pain: they are, once again, losing the child. Abosi interprets his wife’s miscarriage as a private grief, a trauma that he suppresses as he tries to focus on “the business of his people,” i.e., the political preparations for Aburi.11 Yet the reader knows that Aburi will not “set everything right”—rather, it will be the pivotal failure that sets the East on the path to secession and war. By framing this key political breakdown around a failure of reproduction, Emecheta sets up the first of the novel’s several analogies between children and states.

The second emerges from a parallel subplot following Nigerian leader Momoh (read: Gowon) and his wife Elizabeth. Like Julianna and Abosi, Momoh and Elizabeth struggle to bear children—and here too, Emecheta frames that reproductive struggle as a commentary on the political struggle in which Momoh is engaged. Elizabeth, who seems to have had a healthy pregnancy, goes into labor on the very day that Momoh is to be honored as General of the Armed Forces, shortly after the fall of Ore and the routing of Biafran soldiers from Benin.12 The war seems to be going well for Nigeria, and Momoh’s army colleagues are confident. The celebration of the military victories and the celebration of Momoh’s child blend together in a “a day of double joy”—flags flying across Lagos, the central square gussied up “just as it had been for the Independence Day celebrations.”13 The birth of the leader’s child evokes a second independence, a new birth of freedom for a Nigeria soon to defeat the secessionist southeast.

Yet these hopes are dashed almost as soon as they’re set up. Elizabeth’s labor goes on and on, endangering the life of both mother and child. The child that is finally delivered is horribly deformed

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10 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 97.
11 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 98.
12 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 201. Nigeria’s recapture of the Midwest was a turning point in the war, though fighting would continue for more than two more years.
13 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 202, 201.
and dies almost immediately. Regarding the little body, Momoh thinks that it “resembled a giant frog”; Emecheta herself terms the child a “monstrosity,” suggesting that Nigeria itself is a deformed and unviable state: at war with itself, under an unelected military regime, having lost part of its territory, natural resources, and people.\textsuperscript{114} Here it’s worth noting the way Emecheta departs from the trope of “Mother Africa” or women “birthing the nation”—a trope often used to read national or political problems onto the bodies of women.\textsuperscript{115} While this might initially seem to be what’s going on, Ann Marie Adams usefully points out that both Julianna and Elizabeth have previously given birth to healthy children—suggesting that the failures of reproduction depicted in \textit{Destination Biafra} are linked to either their male partners, or to the environmental circumstances in which these troubled pregnancies develop.\textsuperscript{116}

One reading of this novel would pair these two failed childbirth sequences together, suggesting that Emecheta sees both Abosi and Momoh as failed fathers of their would-be nations, equally culpable for Biafra’s failure. (This would ally the novel’s framing with the most straightforward reading of \textit{The Combat}, which I sketched earlier in this chapter.) Yet late in the novel, Emecheta complicates the centering of Abosi and Momoh as potential fathers to Biafra, presenting the reader with a third allegorical child with very different parentage: the child Biafra, born by the side of the road to an unnamed Igbo woman fleeing the war. The mother is young and malnourished, "so skinny...that the nerves of her hands and neck stood out in knobbly relief like those of a starving old woman."\textsuperscript{117} When she delivers a baby boy, one of the older women travelling with her dubs the child "Biafra."\textsuperscript{118} The mother dies just a few hours later, leaving Biafra an orphan.

\textsuperscript{114} Emecheta, \textit{Destination Biafra}, 203.
\textsuperscript{117} Emecheta, \textit{Destination Biafra}, 187.
\textsuperscript{118} Emecheta, \textit{Destination Biafra}, 189.
to be raised collectively by the women and children, including Debbie, who have paused their journey to help with the birth. In offering this alternate genealogy, Emecheta raises another possible way of understanding the genesis of Biafra—not as the child of Abosi, Momoh, or the rest of the political elite, but rather as the child of suffering civilians seeking only safety and peace.

Despite the harrowing circumstances of his birth, the child survives for a time. Emecheta seems to suggest that a Biafra imagined as the child of the common people—rather than the child of an elite military establishment—has more strength and more possibility of surviving. Also worth noting is that this child, unlike Abosi or Momoh’s abortive offspring, actually bears the name “Biafra.” Indeed, the presence of the name itself, bestowed upon a newborn by the community surrounding it, invites a comparison to Waugh’s use of the name “Biafra” in *A Bed of Flowers*. Superficially similar, the two children represent quite distinct visions of the state. In Waugh’s rendition, the child is named Biafra Sunshine Ojukwu, christened with the name of the Biafran leader and welcomed, as I have argued, into the “family” of international society. In Emecheta’s reworking of this trope, Biafra the child is explicitly distanced from Abosi, who—as Emecheta takes pains to show—is unable to father a viable child. Emecheta’s baby Biafra has no other names, because he is orphaned within days of his birth and those who care for him do not know the names of his parents or other family. He is an object of humanitarian care from his first days: Debbie, who carries the child on her back for much of the journey towards Asaba, secretly resolves that she will mother Biafra herself if no surviving family can be located. But the child is sickly and the other refugees are themselves near starvation; there is simply not enough food available to sustain Biafra.

Instead, this Biafra dies as an infant. Debbie unwraps him from her back one day to find that he has died during the hours of walking: “no more than a shrunken lifeless skeleton.”119 One of the other women draws out the obvious symbolism:

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119 Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, 212.
Is our land Biafra going to die like this baby, before it is given time to live at all?...He only lived for a few days! He only lived for a few days! I think the death of this child is symbolic. This is how our Biafra is going to fall. I feel it in my bones.\textsuperscript{120}

For the third time in the novel, an allegorical child succumbs. Biafra's death occurs in the novel in the chapter immediately following the birth and death of Momoh's "monstrous" child, suggesting that here, too, the reader might contrast one allegorical child with another. Yet here Emecheta draws a sharper distinction: Momoh's infant is a child of the political elite, so deformed as to be unrecognizable, unable even to survive the birth process. Biafra enjoys none of the advantages of Momoh's child—sustenance, medical care—but he is sustained, for a time, by the love and care of a community. This contrast between these two children allegorically inscribes Emecheta's deep disdain for Momoh (and for Abosi, similarly unable to father a child), suggesting that, if Biafra is viable at all, it is only viable insofar as it is sustained by the commitment and community of suffering civilians far from the halls of power.

If the novel ended here, then we might read Emecheta's three allegorical children as variations of an elegy for the young state's failure. But the novel does not end with the death of baby Biafra. Instead, it takes the reader on an unexpected detour to London, where Debbie busies herself disseminating pictures of suffering children to British journalists and activists in an attempt to sway British public opinion. It's a curious turn in which Emecheta directs the reader's attention explicitly to the problem of how to represent Biafra: what is at stake in inviting readers to view the political conflict through the lens of the suffering child? What is at stake, in other words, in representing the political conflict as Destination Biafra has, thus far, done?

This final turn is crucial to understanding Destination Biafra's engagement with the figure of the starving child, for two reasons. First, this is the moment in the novel when Emecheta first articulates

\footnote{Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 212.}
concern over the implications of representing Biafra as a child—but it remains an ambivalent concern, tangled up with the desire to accurately represent the real suffering of Biafra’s civilians.

Second, the novel’s denouement actively turns away from imagining Biafra as a child and instead figures Debbie herself—an adult woman—as the sign and symbol of the political dream (if not the nation-state) that is Biafra. Together, these two moves seriously qualify—without quite erasing—the novel’s early interest in figuring Biafra as a child.

Emecheta’s shift towards critiquing the figure of the child comes at the end of Destination Biafra, when Debbie herself becomes a conflicted participant in the Biafran state’s media campaign. Desperate to end the war, she convinces Abosi that she should travel to the UK in order to move the British public to resist the UK government's intervention in the conflict. Pledging to "stir the consciences" of the British public with “pictures of dying children, mutilated bodies and bloated corpses,” she argues that her position as a non-Igbo will give her a credibility that previous Biafran envoys have lacked.\(^{121}\) Abosi agrees, and Debbie is off. Once in London, Debbie organizes protests in Trafalgar Square and shares her eyewitness account with sympathetic journalists.\(^{122}\) Mostly, though, she works via images, ensuring that “the pictures of dying children” appear daily in British newspapers and television.\(^{123}\)

Emecheta's portrayal of this phase of Debbie's journey is complex. On the one hand, Debbie is deeply committed to documenting the suffering of Biafra's civilians: she herself has survived multiple rapes and assaults, she has carried the dying child Biafra on her back, and she has mourned the deaths of several other refugee children. She knows (and the novel's reader knows) that the suffering memorialized in the images she disseminates is real. Given the narrative Emecheta has

\(^{121}\) Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 240. We learn via a brief aside that Debbie is Itsekiri, though her ethnic identity is always framed as secondary to her Nigerian citizenship.

\(^{122}\) Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 241.

\(^{123}\) Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 241.
woven, the reader can understand why Debbie bridles at her British lover's skeptical attitude toward the images. When he asks how the "torrid" photographs got into the Sunday paper, Debbie replies acidly that British journalists took them, irritated at insinuation that her accounts of the war are "over-dramatic." The "torrid" photographs, she implies, are simply a documentary record of what has happened in Biafra.

Yet Debbie also recognizes that the photographs are not simply straightforward documentation. Rather, the deployment of images of Biafran suffering is part of Abosi’s larger strategy. Indeed, the Biafran leader contacts her daily during her time in London, urging her to ensure that the photographs appear in British papers "every day" so that the British public can "never forget about us." In narrating this section, Emecheta characterizes Debbie's work as "ideological warfare," suggesting that the savvy deployment of images of dying children is as much a part of the war as the Red Cross planes loaded with hidden weaponry. The trouble with the pictures of starving children, in Destination Biafra, is not that they are fake or manipulated. The trouble with the pictures is that they represent just one moment in a much larger and more complicated story.

In other words, the London section of Destination Biafra highlights the slippage between allegory and symbol: how the starving child is abstracted from the larger narrative—in which it offers one image of the war—and transformed into a symbol that ostensibly captures the whole of the war. That symbol, far from protecting Biafra (or its children), is then deployed to further fuel the conflict. Or at least, this is what Debbie comes to feel: though she is quite good at this ideological warfare, she's troubled by the instrumentalization of her fellow citizens' suffering. In a striking scene

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124 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 242.
125 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 241.
126 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 241.
inside Debbie's London flat, Emecheta links her protagonist's renewed commitment to Nigerian sovereignty to her growing distaste for the PR mission:

> Alan was immersed in the color magazine of the day's Sunday paper, looking at the pictures of children emaciated beyond recognition, at pictures of bleeding wounds and decomposed corpses that gave a tragic impression of Biafra.

> Then Debbie's voice cut through. “After all, we are a sovereign state. We've been an independent nation for the past nine years. Maybe the fault is more ours. We invited them to come and settle our troubles for us, so they started to take sides to their own advantage. We only can save ourselves. I wish Momoh and Abosi could see that…”

By juxtaposing the "children emaciated beyond recognition" with Debbie's turn toward the language of sovereignty, Emecheta frames true independence as a rejoinder to the "tragic impression" cultivated by those photos. Framing Biafra as an emaciated child suggests to the British reading public that Biafra is helpless and vulnerable, in need of speedy and forceful external intervention. For Debbie, this is precisely the wrong message to cultivate: contra Abosi, she concludes that British sympathy, aid, and even weaponry will not save either Nigeria or Biafra. Rather, “We only can save ourselves” becomes the rallying cry of the final quarter of the novel, which is dominated by Debbie's decision to leave London for Nigeria and to distance herself from both Momoh and Abosi, both of whom she sees as “still colonized.”

Despite their superficial antagonism, *Destination Biafra* suggests, these two men share a disregard for civilian casualties and a poorly-disguised allegiance to Britain. Ultimately, Debbie returns to Nigeria with a mission: to tell the story of the war in a way that honors her own vision of Nigeria/Biafra, resisting the media tropes with which she has lost patience. Through all her travels and routines, she has carried notes—and now she will fashion them into her own narrative of the war: *Destination Biafra*, the novel we are reading.

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128 Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, 258.
129 Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, 258.
This crafted narrative offers a very different image of Biafra than the images that Debbie had earlier disseminated in London, uniting “tragic impressions” with a clear-eyed look at the national and international politics of the war. In effect, the novel is the marker of the character's growth, offering a fuller conceptualization of "Biafra" than Debbie was able to provide to the readers and activists she met in London. Thus the novel incorporates the subplot of baby Biafra, takes seriously Debbie’s grief at the child’s death, and frames the child as one possible figure for the nascent state. Yet the novel complicates that figuration in two different ways. First, it juxtaposes the starving child of refugees with two other allegorical children: the unviable children of Abosi and Momoh, figurations that frame Biafra’s weakness as a political inheritance rather than an innate quality. In articulating three different versions of Biafra-as-child—each of which articulates one perspective on the war—Destination Biafra foregrounds the partiality of the images Debbie deploys in London on Abosi’s behalf.

Second, the novel’s conclusion moves decisively away from these triplet allegories, focusing instead on Debbie herself as a figure for both Nigeria and Biafra. Destination Biafra’s final pages are set inside Biafran territory during Nigeria's final onslaught. Debbie has returned from London, done with Abosi and Momoh, done with the UK, done with narrating her trauma to skeptical journalists. Amidst the chaos of falling bombs, Alan encourages Debbie to flee with him to England, promising to marry her there. Debbie angrily refuses. When Alan points out that even Abosi has fled the country, Debbie scornfully replies that Abosi is "still colonized...a black white man." She is not:

I am a woman and a woman of Africa. I am a daughter of Nigeria and if she is in shame, I shall stay and mourn with her in shame...Goodbye Alan. I didn't mind your being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife; to meet you on an equal basis, like companions, yes, but never again to be your slave".

\[130\] Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 258.
\[131\] Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 258-9.
Given what we know about Debbie, her resistance to marriage makes sense as a literal plot resolution. Earlier in the novel, watching her own parents' unequal relationship, Debbie concludes that she is unwilling to sacrifice her "independence" to gain the "protection" that her mother promises marriage offers. In a striking turn of phrase, she muses that marriage to a domineering husband has rendered her mother "colourless"—a word whose connotations suggest just the kind of whitewashing of which she later accuses Abosi and Momoh. In ultimately rejecting Alan's proposal, Debbie casts herself as a figure for Nigeria—indeed, even for Africa—rejecting an unequal "marriage" to the British Empire. Among Debbie's final words to Alan are the insistence that she has no wish to marry "an exploiter of my nation." (The turn towards framing Debbie herself as an allegorical figure has been prefigured by Emecheta's repeated insistence that Debbie is "neither Ibo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply a Nigerian.

In other words, Destination Biafra closes by framing an adult woman as the most appropriate figure for Biafra. This turn towards Debbie as the central allegorical figure is enabled by Destination Biafra's unusual understanding of Biafra as the fulfilment of Nigerian independence rather than an alternative to it: as an allegorical figure, Debbie represents both Biafra and Nigeria. Although Debbie has herself become a mother, raising two orphaned boys from the band of refugees with whom she traveled across Biafra, the novel pointedly does not figure these boys as stand-ins for Biafra. Thus, across the novel, we move from reading “Biafra” as a child in need of care to reading “Biafra” as the adult caretaker. In many ways, this is a radical move: most obviously because it disrupts the developmentalist logic that sees Biafra (and Nigeria) as children not quite ready for the full

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132 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 45, 159.
133 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 258.
134 Emecheta makes this observation in the novel's foreword (viii), and repeats it in nearly identical terms midway through the novel (126). However, the novel also identifies Debbie as Itsekiri, a group historically centered in what is now Delta State but often included among the Biafran minorities. This dual characterization—in which Debbie is simultaneously a member of specific minority group and "simply a Nigerian"—has the effect of eliding the ethnic diversity within both Biafra and Nigeria.
responsibilities of adulthood—but also because it presents Biafra/Nigeria as a woman who chooses independence over an unequal partnership.

This is just the sort of allegorical move that Susan Andrade identifies as common among African women writers of the immediately postcolonial era: an allegory in which the domestic drama and the national allegory can be read dialectically as reinforcing each other, rather than one in which the figural (nationalist) reading wholly subsumes the literal (domestic). But as Andrade emphasizes, these allegories often require “an act of strong reading” to discern; because the allegory is subtle, it emerges only through the reader’s attention and interpretation. Another way of saying this is that different readers may disagree on how best to read Destination Biafra’s allegories. Should we see Biafra as the damaged offspring of Abosi? Of Momoh? The loved child of the people of the southeast, dying for want of resources? These three framings imply different understandings of the political origins and viability of Biafra as a state, but they share an understanding that Biafra is, indeed, a young state—born from Nigeria in one way or another, yet distinct from it. The framing of Debbie as incarnating both Biafra and Nigeria implies still a different framing. Here, Biafra is not a young state but a potential future for Nigeria, already independent and recognized as part of the world community. Instead of promising future growth, "Biafra" names the state of complete and full development. Because the novel closes with this allegory, I have argued here that the weight of the novel pushes readers toward this interpretation. Nonetheless, the earlier child figures occupy an important structural role in Destination Biafra, requiring readers to constantly assess and move between different possible figurations of Biafra’s past, present, and future. In other words, Destination Biafra engages readers in the sort of active interpretive work that both Jameson and Andrade highlight as one of the affordances of complex allegory. In doing so, it cultivates in readers

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the sort of critical interpretive capacities that allow us to question the historical portrayal of Biafra as a land of starving children.

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This chapter has grouped together three novels not often read in concert: Kole Omotoso’s *The Combat*, Auberon Waugh’s *A Bed of Flowers*, and Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*. What unites these novels is the presence, in all three, of a child character either explicitly named Biafra or framed as a stand-in for the young state. In doing so, these texts exemplify a sub-genre of Biafra war novels that draw on allegory to articulate the international politics of the war. By figuring the suffering child as a state battered by an unjust international order—rather than as an individual in need of care—these novels repurpose the image of the starving children that had come to dominate international press coverage, routing the reader’s attention away from empathy and towards a structural view of the conflict. The figure of the allegorical child thus has two major effects, somewhat in tension with each other. From one perspective, these allegories articulate the limits of Biafran sovereignty in a neocolonial world, emphasizing the role of other "adult" countries (Britain, Russia, South Africa) in allowing or disallowing Biafra a place in the family of nations. At the same time, depicting the Biafran child as a nascent state takes seriously its capacity for development into full sovereignty, an implicit rebuke of the media imagery that reduced the figure for Biafra to a child in need of a savior.

Reading these three novels with an eye to the larger media landscape also reveals a striking cross-pollination between wartime journalism and the generation of immediately postwar novels. Part of what I want to establish here is the degree to which imagery and metaphors that were first articulated in contemporaneous news coverage were picked up, explored, and transformed in the
work of novelists immediately following the war. By tracking a trope that emerges in the factual narrative and passes into fiction, I point to the permeability of the boundaries between literary and nonliterary writing—which, in turn, helps us recognize the war writing as one large ecosystem that contributes to defining the shape and content of sovereignty in the Biafran context.

The first half of this dissertation has engaged, in various ways, ideas about development—successful or stalled, desired or critiqued. These ideas have deep roots in ancient and enlightenment thinking about childhood, the family, race, empire, and tutelage. In the second half of this dissertation, I turn towards new ways of thinking about sovereignty that fully emerged only in the mid-20th century, as decolonization itself forced a reckoning with the limits of dominant paradigms. The next chapter begins this shift by turning to the concept of genocide, which found a place in international law only in the decade or so prior to the Nigeria-Biafra war. As with the figure of the child, the concept of genocide began as a powerful rhetorical trope within Biafra and later moved into international news reporting and activist circles. After the war, many of the starkest arguments made in Biafran propaganda were deployed more flexibly by fiction writers, often in ways that illuminated fissures within the Biafran state. It is to this literature that we now turn.
Figures


Fig. 2: Chinele Udechukwu [L] “comfortably seated on a new pouffe purchased for her comfort by her parents.” Uchechukwu Okogeri [R] enjoying his “fat birthday chicken.” *Biafra Sun*, July 23 1967, 6.
Fig 3: Two-year-old Geoffrey Ugochuku Ndubeze [R] “trying his hands on his ‘automatic rifle’ just to ensure he has not forgotten what he was taught.” *Biafra Sun* August 6, 1967, 6.

Fig 4: Two-year-old Emmanuel Onyewuche Ndukwe. “With a machete in hand all he says is 'Where is Gowon and I will bring his head to Biafra.' His father was one of the Biafran soldiers who escaped death at Ikeja barracks last year.” *Biafra Sun*, August 12, 1967, 6.
Fig. 5: “There is none too small...for the important job of defending the Fatherland.” *Biafra Sun*, July, 12 1967, 4.
Fig. 6: “Albino Boy,” 1968. Photograph by Don McCullin.

Fig. 7: The Sun, June 12, 1968, 1-3
Fig. 8: Photograph featured in *The Sun*, June 12, 1968. A malnourished child hides under a cot during an air raid at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Umuahia. Photograph by Ron Burton/Mirrorpix/Getty Images.

Fig. 9: A malnourished child during the war. January 1, 1968. Getty Images.
Fig. 10: Cover of *Life* Magazine, July 12, 1968.

Fig 11 — A malnourished child waits for emergency food and medical shipments at the war’s end, January 13, 1970. Bettmann Archive.
Fig. 12: A child dies of malnutrition in the arms of a British nurse at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Umuahia, June 11, 1968. Photograph by Ron Burton/Mirrorpix/Getty Images.

Fig. 13: “Starving Twenty Four Year Old Mother with Child, Biafra,” 1968. Photograph by Don McCullin.
Fig. 14: Flyer from the Committee to Save the Children of Biafra, April 13, 1969.

Fig. 15: Appeal from American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief, August 14, 1968.
Chapter 3: Never Again

Genocide Analogies from the Holocaust to Darfur

Reviewing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2006 novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, writer Lee Aitken framed its setting with an implicit comparison: "Before Darfur, before Rwanda," she wrote, "there was Biafra."1 Adichie’s novel is a sweeping family saga that tells the story of the Nigeria-Biafra War as experienced by an extended and often contentious family. An international bestseller, *Half of a Yellow Sun* addressed itself to many readers who knew little of Nigerian history—and so the invocation of other African contexts surely aimed to give some context to readers for whom “Biafra” meant nothing. Yet the novel itself does not offer any obvious analogies to Darfur or Rwanda, and—as we shall see—Adichie herself has strongly resisted this framing. So what does it mean to read Biafra today as an antecedent to the genocides that closed the 20th century? This chapter places the reception of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a “Darfur novel” in relation to a long history of genocide analogies in Biafran-focused novels. Initially, these comparisons focus on the Holocaust and function as markers for implicit claims to sovereignty; more recently, they have come to center on Darfur.

In focusing on genocide, this chapter steps away from older traditions of international law that frame the capacity to be sovereign in terms of civilization and development. While those strains of thinking continue to operate powerfully up to the present day—and certainly continue to be relevant to the literature I discuss in this chapter—the second half of my dissertation focuses primarily on a new legal context. That context is the post-WWII development of new legal instruments oriented

towards human rights, genocide, self-determination, refugee protection, and the push for a New International Economic Order. Many of these new conventions and norms intersected with the problem of sovereignty, raising questions such as: what does the right to self-determination look like when the group claiming it is ostensibly already part of a sovereign state? What happens when a government abuses its own citizens? Who, if anyone, is responsible for protecting rights and preventing abuses on a global scale? These are difficult questions around which full consensus has not yet emerged. In the 1960s, as the Nigerian Civil War unfolded, they were new and untested—providing an exciting but untried opportunity for pro-Biafran thinkers to build an intellectual case for an independent state.

After the war ended, genocide analogies remained a persistent feature of the war novels that began to emerge in the 1970s. Since the moment of Biafra’s potential recognition as a state among states had passed, these novels were less invested in using genocide analogies as a form of political persuasion. Instead, such analogies increasingly functioned as a form of memory work, keeping alive a sense of the enormity of what Biafrans suffered. In developing this point, I draw on Michael Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory,” which invites us to explore the effects of drawing comparisons between disparate sites of historical trauma. In his influential account of the relationship between Holocaust memory and decolonization, Rothberg argues that comparisons and connections between disparate sites of historical trauma can create space for new stories to be told. This chapter uses the concept of multidirectional memory to look at how, in the aftermath of war, Biafra novels use and/or resist comparisons to genocides past and present. In doing so, these novels make sovereignty claims via a very different logic than the narratives of development and childhood that have structured the first two chapters of this dissertation.

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My argument unfolds in two parts. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the textual identification between Biafra and the Holocaust—during and after the war—asking how these analogies articulate a relationship between genocide and self-determination. I show how wartime propaganda and journalism linked the civil war to the Holocaust, bolstering claims of Biafran sovereignty that, at their strongest, equated anything short of an independent Biafran state with genocide. Such arguments were grounded primarily in the metaphorical equation of Igbos with persecuted Jews—a comparison that predates the civil war by many centuries, but that was resurrected and repurposed to frame the Biafran conflict as the Holocaust redux. In this framing, it is precisely Igbo suffering that authorizes the imagination of a strong, protecting state: Biafra as the new Israel. In the words of a 1968 editorial by British writers Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul, Muriel Spark, and Auberon Waugh, “Biafra’s suffering…has earned her the right to exist.”

Although an observer mission in 1969 concluded that genocide was not occurring in Biafra, its conclusions were widely contested by Biafrans and their allies. Since then, the question of genocide has continued to haunt both imaginative work and scholarship on the war. In the second section of the chapter, I explore how these genocide analogies shift in the civil war literature of the early 21st century, as both the Holocaust and Biafra recede further into the past. I argue that more recent Biafran war literature engages not (only) with the Holocaust but with the “ambiguous genocide” in Darfur (and, to a lesser extent, the Rwandan genocide). Because of major shifts in the understanding of humanitarian intervention—shifts that were precipitated, in part, by the legacy of Biafra—the relationship between genocide and sovereignty in the early 2000s was dramatically different than it had been in the 1960s and 70s. The invocation of Darfur as an analogue to Biafra thus engages with a different set of norms around recognition, sovereignty, and humanitarian

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intervention. Such analogies can direct reader attention in two directions simultaneously, asking us to examine Darfur in light of Biafra and Biafra in light of Darfur. Rather than simply turning to the past as a warning—the "never again" impulse—such multidirectional reading practices enable us to draw on the resources of the recent past to illuminate the gaps and elisions of the older, more settled stories.

**Comparative Frameworks for Historical Trauma**

At the time of the Nigeria-Biafra War, Holocaust memory was still very much in formation. Early understandings of the Holocaust—where not repressed altogether—framed the genocide as a paradigmatic example of Nazi criminality or brutality rather than as a conceptually distinct crime. Photos from concentration and death camps, for example, were initially read as generic "atrocity photos." Only in the 1960s did they become legible as evidence of genocide to many Europeans, in large part due to media coverage of the Eichmann trial (1961), the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963-5), and, to a lesser extent, separate trials of personnel at Chelmno (1962-5), Belzec (1963-5), Treblinka (1964-5), and Sobibor (1965-6). Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) was instrumental in sparking serious engagement among European and US intellectuals with the nature and causes of the Holocaust. In the UK, Muriel Spark's reporting on the Eichmann trial—and 1965 novel *The Mandelbaum Gate*, which writes the trial into a loosely related fictional saga—also contributed to the development of a common cultural memory of the Holocaust.

Holocaust memory also emerged, as Michael Rothberg argues, in relation to decolonization—even (or perhaps especially) when those events seem unrelated. While we might be inclined to see

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public memory of, say, the use of torture in the Algerian War as unrelated to public memory of the Holocaust, Rothberg suggests that the two emerge in tandem in France in the 1960s. He writes against the commonsense notion of “competitive memory,” which frames memory in the public sphere as a zero sum game in which any space accorded to one past trauma takes space away from another. In its place, he frames the idea of “multidirectional memory,” an understanding of cultural memory that “encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others.”7 From this perspective, the public sphere is open to continual expansion and reconstruction: thus the emergence of Holocaust memory can “contribute to the articulation of other histories.”8 In short, the public articulation of trauma and suffering can function as a form of cross-pollination rather than competition.

Rothberg roots his account of the relationship between the Holocaust and colonization in the work of an earlier generation of thinkers, particularly Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt. Through the concepts of the *choc en retour* (reverse shock) and the "boomerang effect," both Césaire and Arendt theorize European fascism as a form of violent authoritarianism intimately related to colonization. Yet as Rothberg points out, their writing approaches this nexus "from different directions and with significantly different political assumptions."9 In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt argues that the period of imperialism inaugurated by the Berlin conference anticipates the rise of totalitarianism in Europe such that "it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes.”10 As Sonali Thakkar observes, the linear

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temporality of this account "risks treating imperial violence as a dress rehearsal for what follows."\(^{11}\)

Rothberg makes a similar critique of Arendt's Eurocentrism, arguing that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Africa functions as an "ahistorical backdrop" against which European history unfolds.\(^ {12}\) In his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), however, Césaire frames the relationship rather differently, suggesting that colonialism is not, as Arendt has it, preparation for a future catastrophe but rather the catastrophe itself: Hitler, he argued, "applied to Europe coloniser procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa."\(^{13}\) Césaire's insistence on treating colonialism as something more significant than simply a "preparation" for European violence was also elaborated, in slightly different ways, by anticolonial thinkers as ideologically diverse as George Padmore,\(^ {14}\) Jawaharlal Nehru,\(^ {15}\) Frantz Fanon,\(^ {16}\) and Amílcar Cabral.\(^ {17}\) This rich history of anticolonial thought provides the essential framework that enables Rothberg to theorize the "multidirectional ripple effects" of colonial violence.\(^ {18}\)

More recently, Aamir Mufti has compellingly connected the history of Jewish minoritization in Europe to the status of minorities throughout the colonial world. In this analysis, the so-called

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11 Sonali Thakkar, “Continental Drifters: Holocaust Memory, Decolonization, and Postwar Migration to Europe” (Columbia University, 2012), 57. https://doi.org/10.7916/D87S7VVB.
12 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 37-39. Rothberg frames Arendt's depiction of the colonized as Conradian, noting that the *Heart of Darkness* is a key source text for Arendt's chapter "Race and Bureaucracy" and suggesting that Arendt is unable to fully escape "the racist suppositions of colonial logic." In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt herself writes that Conrad's novella is "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa." See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 185.
14 In 1936, Padmore wrote that "the Colonies are the breeding-ground for the type of fascist mentality which is being let loose in Europe to-day...the fight against fascism cannot be separated from the right of all colonial peoples and subject races to Self-Determination." See George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (London: Wishart Books, 1936), 4.
15 While imprisoned during World War II, Nehru wrote that "the whole ideology of this [British] rule was that of the Herrenvolk and the Master Race, and the structure of government was based upon it; indeed the idea of a master race is inherent in imperialism." See Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New York: The John Day company, 1946), 327.
"Jewish question" in 19th century Europe established the paradigm for minority experience in modernity—a paradigm that was then disseminated globally through the colonial export of political commitments such as nationalism and the nation-state.19 Though Mufti focuses primarily on South Asia, elements of his thesis resonate in the Nigerian context, too. In particular, he writes that a larger purpose of his book is to "outline cultural possibilities for groups deemed minorities that take neither the form of assimilation in the official sense nor of separatism of the political sort."20 In the Biafran case, clearly, political separatism was the approach of choice. Mufti observes that this approach "is often the most complete form assimilation can take, despite being presented as its opposite," and this strikes me as an especially important insight in the Biafran case.21 As we shall see in this chapter, the Biafran insistence on their status as the persecuted "Jews of Africa" and need for protection in an independent nation-state led them to recapitulate many of the political problems that had troubled Nigeria—not least, the problem of minority.

Such intellectual investments in comparison help make sense of the ease with which activists linked Biafra to the Holocaust in the 1960s. Indeed, one of the striking features of transnational Jewish activism around Biafra was how easily activist leaders accepted and built upon Holocaust comparisons deployed in media and activist pamphlets. As Lasse Heerten notes, American Jews were “quite at ease with comparing the horrific fate of their own people in the Nazi camps to the fate of the Biafrans.”22 To take just one example, Heerten has traced the founding of the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief—a group of twenty-one Jewish organizations that banded together to funnel aid to Biafra—to the canny deployment of Holocaust analogies by two Irish priests. The priests, who were serving parishes in Biafra, travelled to meet with the head of the

20 Mufti, Enlightenment in the Colony, 8.
21 Mufti, Enlightenment in the Colony, 8.
22 Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 203.
American Jewish Committee in 1968 to seek aid for Biafra. An AJC memo from the meeting notes that, to the listening Jewish staff, the priest’s anguished plea evoked “the voices of the few Jews who managed to flee from Germany and Hungary and Poland in the early 1940s and who came to Paris and London and New York to stir the world’s conscience to come to the aid of their doomed brothers.”23 “Just 25 years later,” the memo concluded, “it could not be allowed to happen again.”24 The priests emphasized their point by sharing photographs of starving children—images, that, to the eyes of AJC director Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, read as “1968 versions of photographs of Jewish children taken in the 1940s in such other notorious sites named Bergen-Belsen, Thereisenstadt [sic], Auschwitz.”25 A few months later, when the imagery of starving children had become widespread in international newspapers, many other Jewish leaders made similar comparisons. One representative example is a speech in Manhattan by Rabbi James Rudin, who vividly evoked the Holocaust and Biafra as intertwined events:

In my mind’s eye the smokestacks of Auschwitz blur into the cities and the bush country of Biafra. In my wakeful and terrible visions I see the mass Jewish graves of Europe rapidly filling with starving and dying Biafrans.26

Like Tanenbaum, Rudin invokes Holocaust memory precisely in order to motivate listeners to engage with contemporaneous violence in Biafra. For these Jewish leaders, Holocaust memory was important in its own right, but also essentially connected to other past and future genocides—and most meaningful when it could be used to spur activism in the present. Rudin and Tanenbaum do not appear to fear that connecting the Holocaust to Biafra will diminish Americans’ understanding of the former. Rather, both rabbis seem to share a commitment to what Rothberg calls

23 Quoted in Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 175.
24 Quoted in Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 175.
25 Quoted in Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 175.
26 Quoted in Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 179.
multidirectional memory—a sense that forging connections between different traumas has the potential to underscore the seriousness of both crises.

Like Rothberg, I take the dissimilarity for granted: every conflict and genocide is unique, and each can best be understood first through its own particular history. At the same time, the absolutely pervasive use of this analogy suggests that we cannot understand the Biafran government’s canny politicking without investigating what is at stake in invoking this analogy. Thus, I take up Rothberg’s invitation to “focus [our] intellectual energy on investigating what it means to invoke connections” in spite of dissimilarity. How does the invocation of Jewish suffering function to undergird Biafran claims to sovereignty? And how does this genocide-Biafra-sovereignty nexus change as both Biafra and the Holocaust recede further into the past? These are the questions that the first part of this chapter will explore.

A New Israel? Genocide Rhetoric in Biafran Propaganda

Before turning to the novels that occupy most of my attention, it will be useful to set up how the Biafran rhetoric of genocide intersected with the political campaign for self-determination. Genocide was, in the words of historian John Stremlau, "the most powerful and effective theme of the war." Claims of genocide appear in Biafran state propaganda throughout the conflict, and with particular intensity and prevalence from early 1968 through mid-1969. The basic goal of Biafran propagandists, Stremlau explains, was to bolster Ojukwu’s argument that, without a ceasefire and

27 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 18.
28 Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory, 18.
30 For an overview of Biafra’s approach to propaganda, see Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970, 110-117 and 320-322. After the fall of Enugu and the loss of the Midwest in September and October 1967, the Biafran propaganda operation was reorganized and given substantial new resources and autonomy. In this new dispensation, the Directorate of Propaganda consciously focused on genocide as a central theme. By mid-1969, Ojukwu judged that this approach was not working and shifted gears, emphasizing instead Biafra’s self-reliance and de facto political autonomy; at this point the genocide rhetoric, while still present, became less of a focus.
political settlement, "the war would continue until every man, woman, and child in Biafra died either of starvation or at the hands of federal troops." 31 Paul Onu, who worked within the Directorate of Propaganda, summarized the messaging:

The genocide propaganda was designed to confirm and instill in the public's mind that nothing short of a sovereign Biafra could guarantee security of life and property...it terrorized the home public and alarmed and alerted the entire world for it conjured up an image of the Nazi regime and its Jewish victims." 32

Onu's description highlights two significant features of the propaganda campaign. First, the Directorate linked sovereignty and genocide by suggesting Nigeria posed an existential threat to the survival of Biafrans as a people; "nothing short of a sovereign Biafra" could guarantee civilians' safety. Such claims appeared in the Biafra Sun throughout the war. A Sun article from January 1969, for example, decries the "18 month old war of genocide against the people of Biafra." The article continues: "We cannot surrender our sovereignty. We cannot surrender because to do so spells doom for our entire population—for the 14,000,000 people of Biafra!" 33 The repetition of genocide claims aimed to convince Biafrans that surrender would lead inevitably to massacre; if what they were fighting was not war but genocide, they had nothing to lose by fighting to the bitter end. Indeed, an internal report by Biafra's Directorate for Propaganda noted that genocide claims were the government's "trump card," the primary reason that citizens were willing to "persist in the fight against all odds." 34

Second, Onu notes that the propaganda campaign invoked the Nazi regime and the suggested a parallel between suffering Biafrans and the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. As historians Douglas

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34 "What Biafrans Know About the Nigeria/Biafra War," ed. Research Bureau Appraisal Committee (Enugu: Appraisals Committee, Directorate for Propaganda), n.d., 15. The Biafran government worked hard to inculcate this idea, even carrying out a public opinion survey to assess how the citizenry viewed such claims. The results of that survey showed that about half of those surveyed agreed that the ongoing fight was necessary "to prevent Nigeria from killing us off."
Anthony and Lasse Heerten have shown, these genocide claims were frequently developed through analogies to the Holocaust, Jewish suffering, and the state of Israel. An early example of this tendency is the *Nigerian Pogrom* pamphlet discussed in Chapter 1, which documents the 1966 anti-Igbo massacres and begins to make the case for Eastern separatism, if not secession, via implicit claims of genocide. Although the pamphlet does not use the term "genocide," its repetition of "pogrom"—which appears in the title and throughout the text—picks up on the language of anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe. It also asserts, more directly, that the Igbo experience in Nigeria "rivals in its inhumanity...the fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany." Such comparisons continued through early 1967; by the time Biafra declared independence, they had become ubiquitous. A letter to the editor in July 1967 *Biafra Sun* is representative:

> To those who rule Nigeria, Ibos are seen in the same light in which Adolf Hitler was [sic] the Jews. They are a people who must be hated and despised; a people who have no right to aspire to the good things of life; a people who must be completely effaced from the face of the earth.

Within a week, the paper had printed two more articles on the same topic. The first, focused on gender-based violence, suggested that Biafran women's suffering could only be compared to that of "Jewish women during the Hitlerite scourge." The second, written by Onitsha Provincial Administrator Anthony Modebe, argued that Biafrans were "the persecuted Jews of Africa."

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38 "We Salute Our Women," *Biafra Sun*, July 26 1967, 3.

In framing Biafrans as the "Jews of Africa," these writers did not invent a wholly new analogy; rather, their arguments repurposed a discourse with deep roots in the region.⁴⁰ Though this discourse can be traced at least to Olaudah Equiano's 1789 *Interesting Narrative*, its contemporary form emerged from early 20th century speculation by both British and Igbo writers.⁴¹ In 1912, missionary and amateur anthropologist George Basden noted that he “[could not] help being struck by the similitude” between Igbo and Jewish customs, particularly noting religion, circumcision, and the relative dearth of intransitive verbs.⁴² Basden, who lived among the Igbo for thirty-five years, would go on to repeat these comparisons in two influential works, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (1921) and *Niger Ibos* (1938). These texts became important ethnographic sources on the Igbo, read by colonial administrators and Igbo elites alike—and available at Onitsha market at least through the 1990s.⁴³ Though Basden did not quite say that the Igbo were descended from Hebrew ancestors, it was an inference easily made in a colonial intellectual environment teeming with varieties of the Hamitic hypothesis. From the 1920s onward, the notion of Hebraic and/or Egyptian descent was picked up by Igbo historians and pamphleteers, who authored new, local histories that circulated

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⁴¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself.* Vol. I.” (London: Published by the author, 1789), 30-39, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/equiano1.html. In the early pages of the narrative, Equiano introduces readers to the customs and geography of his own “Eboe” people in what is now Nigeria’s Delta state. Mentioning practices such as circumcision, ritual purification, and the eating of bitter herbs, Equiano suggests that his Igbo ancestors are the descendants of the Jewish people described in Genesis. He cites John Gill and John Clarke, both contemporary Biblical scholars, to support this claim. In 1868, James Africanus Horton, a Sierra Leonean of Igbo origin, made the more specific claim that the Igbo were a remnant of the lost tribes of Israel. See James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples, British and Native: With the Requirements Necessary for Establishing That Self Government Recommended by the Committee of the House of Commons, 1865; and a Vindication of the African Race* (London: W. J. Johnson, 1868), 183-89.


widely within Igboland as inexpensive pamphlets. Of particular note was Akwelumo Ike’s 1950 *The Origins of the Ibos*, which asserted definitely that the Igbo were descendants of Jewish migrants; ‘Ibo,’ Ike explained, was a contraction of ‘Hebrew.’ In the late 1940s and 1950s, within the context of a push to consolidate Igbo cultural identity—exemplified by the creation of institutions such as the Igbo Federal Union and the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture—the myth of a common Hebraic origin bolstered Igbo unity and provided a language for articulating what made the Igbo distinct from Nigeria’s other groups. By the mid-1960s, the notion that the Jews and the Igbo shared a common ancestry had achieved wide currency within both Igbo and non-Igbo communities. For many Igbos, the connection to Judaism was a source of pride and strength, an assertion of their long history and 'civilized' status. It also, of course, offered a language with which to articulate experiences of dispossession, prejudice, and violence.

The Biafran propaganda campaign repurposed this discourse by tying the Igbo experience to the Holocaust specifically rather than to Jewishness more broadly. Such analogies were addressed to an international audience as well as a domestic one, and often mobilized explicit references to the Genocide Convention, UN Charter, and UDHR. For instance, in February 1968 the Biafran government submitted to the UN Secretary General a memo concerning “the deliberate and

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44 Afigbo, “Traditions of Igbo Origins,” 2; Bruder, “Proto-History,” 47; Chuku, “Igbo Historiography,” 4. Many of these claims focused on specific Igbo groups such as the Aro and Nri. See, for example, the pamphlets of Stephen Nwanagoro and E. K. Ijomanta, which drew on the valorization of the Aro and Nri by British colonial officer Herbert Palmer.


47 This rhetorical/historical linkage coexists and intersects with the increasing number of present-day practicing Igbo Jews in a variety of synagogues (both in the former Biafra and throughout Nigeria).

48 Of course, the association could also be deployed negatively. For some British colonial writers, the “Jews of Africa” label was a backhanded compliment that relies on anti-Semitic tropes.


50 The Genocide Convention had come into force in 1951. At the time, Nigeria (like other colonized territories) was ineligible to ratify it. Nevertheless, Biafran and pro-Biafran rhetoric leveraged the Convention’s authority both directly and indirectly. See Anthony, “‘Ours is a war of survival’: Biafra, Nigeria and arguments about genocide, 1966–70,” 206.

Addressed to Secretary General U Thant, the memo accuses Nigeria of “a genocide of an enormity only equalled in recent times by the experience of Jews from the Nazis.” (The memo received no response.) Later that year, the Biafra Sun reported that Ojukwu had called on world leaders to "stop the genocide being committed by Nigeria in Biafra" by appealing to Article 8 of the Genocide Convention. In speaking to the Organization of African Unity later in 1968, Ojukwu drove the point home even harder. “We accuse Gowon of genocide,” he concluded, “for seeking to exterminate 14 million Biafrans in a most gruesome manner.” He then accuses Gowon of “aspiring to be the Hitler of Africa.” Framing Gowon as the "incarnation of Hitler" was also a common tactic in the Biafra Sun; on occasion, the Nigerian leader was also likened to Goebbels.

This insistence on likening the Biafran experience to that of the Jews under Hitler led, rhetorically, to an assertion of likeness between Biafra and Israel. Biafra was, its propaganda declared, "a republic beleaguered, like Israel valiantly defending its national existence." If the Jewish experience of genocide had made visible the necessity of establishing Israel as a safe homeland, the logic went, then the Biafran experience of genocide surely demanded a similar

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53 “Ojukwu Appeals to United Nations,” Biafra Sun, October 4, 1968, 1. Article 8 of the Genocide Convention allows that "any contracting party" may call on the UN to take necessary action to prevent genocide. Biafra, of course, was not a recognized state and thus could hardly be a “Contracting Party.” From this perspective, the very invocation of Article 8 becomes a means by which Biafra represents itself as a legitimate member of the international community.
response: thus Biafra, like Israel, deserved international legal recognition. So although Israel itself never recognized Biafra, it nevertheless featured prominently in Biafran speeches and newspapers.\textsuperscript{57} For example, the \textit{Eastern Nigeria Spotlight}'s cover story on April 20\textsuperscript{th} 1967—just weeks before the declaration of independence—concerned Ojukwu's meeting with the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria. The piece summarized Ojukwu's position thus:

\begin{quote}
Ojukwu said that as an Israeli, the diplomat was in a better position to understand the true feelings of the people of this region, whose sufferings last year could only be compared to what happened in Hitler's Germany during the last world war...The Governor paid tribute to the people of Israel who, he said, made their destiny out of "sheer hard work" and said the East would emulate their splendid example.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Indeed, when Biafra did in fact declare independence a few weeks later, the new nation was cast precisely as a second Israel. In the \textit{Biafra Sun}, Nnaoke Arunsi of the University at Nsukka framed the declaration of independence as "the beginning of the end of a long and bitter struggle of a persecuted people for survival and self-determination."\textsuperscript{59} When legislators in Enugu adopted the motion for independence, Arunsi continued, they "accomplished exactly the same task" as the Jewish National Council and the General Zionist Council had accomplished in 1948 by proclaiming the establishment of Israel.\textsuperscript{60}

The invocation of Israeli sovereignty was given special salience by a coincidence of geopolitical timing: Biafra's declaration of independence on May 30\textsuperscript{th} 1967 was followed within a week by the start of the Six-Day War between Israel and the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. That brief conflict ended in a resounding victory for Israel, which occupied the Gaza Strip,

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\textsuperscript{57} In fact, Israel saw good relations with Nigeria as key to its African foreign policy and sold arms to the Federal government throughout the war. However, many Israelis disagreed with this policy, invoking parallels between their own history and Biafra's struggle in much the way that Biafran propaganda did. See Levey, "Israel, Nigeria, and the Biafran Civil War" for an account of political conflict within Israel over its Nigeria policy.
\textsuperscript{60} Nnaoke Arunsi, "Biafra—a Child of True Nationalism," \textit{Biafra Sun}, July 4 1967, 3.
\end{flushright}
Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, and West Bank. While many African states saw the occupation of Sinai, in particular, as an unacceptable trespass on Egyptian sovereignty, Biafra enthusiastically endorsed Israeli power. In the following months, the Biafra Sun highlighted Israel's victory and drew comparisons—often in dubious religious and racial terms—to their own situation. For example, one writer argued in early 1968 that Egypt was defeated due to its plans “to annihilate Israel.” “Those who fight for survival,” the article warned, “are never defeated”—and went on to compare Israel’s victory to Biafra’s (presumed) eventual victory in the war “of genocidal vandalism” waged by the North.61 Similarly, an August article in the Biafra Sun noted that despite its size, Israel had successfully beaten the Arabs—characterized in terms of their “bloodthirsty and clammy religion.”62 “The Arabs provoked the war,” the paper continued, “because they did not and still do not want the Israelis to exist as a nation.”63 Indeed, the association of Northern Nigeria with the Arab opponents of Israel was to become a recurrent theme, one often expressed via anti-Muslim rhetoric. One writer in the Biafra Sun, for instance, characterized Northern Nigerians as “barbarians” and “religious fanatics” who refused to recognize Israel for the same reason that they refused to recognize Biafra: they fail to see that these two nations are chosen by God. “In the fullness of time,” the article concludes “we shall emerge victorious...for He that keepeth Israel and indeed Biafra will neither sleep nor slumber.”64

The high-water mark of this discourse was April 1968, when Tanzania recognized Biafra as a sovereign state in terms that explicitly invoked the parallel to Israel. I quote the final two paragraphs of Tanzania’s statement at length:

The world has taken it upon itself to utter many ill-informed criticisms of the Jews of Europe for going to their deaths without any concerted struggle. But out of sympathy for

62 Biafra Sun, August 6 1967, 6.
63 Biafra Sun, August 6 1967, 6.
64 Biafra Sun, September 10 1967, 7
the sufferings of this people, and in recognition of the world’s failure to take action at the appropriate time, the UN established the state of Israel in territory which had belonged to the Arabs for thousands of years. It was felt that only by the establishment of a Jewish homeland, and a Jewish National State, could Jews be expected to live in the world under conditions of human scarcity. Tanzania has recognised the state of Israel and will continue to do so because of its belief that every people must have some place in the world where they are not liable to be rejected by their fellow citizens.

But the Biafrans have now suffered the same kind of rejection within their state that the Jews of Germany experienced. Fortunately they already had a homeland. They have retreated to it for their own protection, and for the same reason—after all other efforts had failed—they have declared it to be an independent state...We therefore recognise the state of Biafra as an independent sovereign entity, and as a member of the community of nations.65

In this language, we see the full flowering of the Biafran government’s rhetorical insistence on the analogy between Jewish and Biafran suffering, and its contention that said suffering must lead—in Biafra as it had in Israel—to recognition as a sovereign nation. Tanzania’s recognition was the first international recognition Biafra had achieved, and it came after nearly a year of increasingly hard fighting; Enugu and Onitsha had fallen to Nigerian forces, and Port Harcourt was besieged (and would fall within a few weeks). The new government seat at Umuahia was likewise encircled by enemy troops. Tanzania’s recognition provided a morale boost; the Biafra Sun’s headline cried out “Biafra has made it!”66 Most promising of all for Biafra, Tanzania’s recognition was followed quickly by recognition from Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia. By late May 1968, it seemed that Biafra might find some meaningful support from the international community after all.

That dream, however, was short-lived. Other than the four African countries named above, only Haiti recognized Biafra. Indeed, the Biafran government’s rhetorical focus on genocide turned out to be something of a Pyrrhic victory; analogies to the Holocaust were pervasive and powerful enough to prompt no fewer than three international observer teams to travel to Nigeria to

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66 Biafra Sun, April 15 1968, 1.
investigate the claims—but none found compelling evidence of genocide. In late 1968, the most prominent group of observers released its conclusions; that report was promptly reprinted and disseminated by the Nigerian Government, who retitled it “No Genocide.” That conclusion was dismissed—with some reason—by the Biafran government, who pointed out that the team had visited only Nigerian-held parts of the country. Indeed, the impartiality and comprehensiveness of that report leaves a great deal to be desired, and the question of genocide remains highly politicized. But for western powers like the US and the UK—and even for Biafra’s sometime ally France—the observer team’s report effectively laid to rest the question of genocide—and with it, the dream that Biafra would be able to emulate the “splendid example” of Israel. Instead of being remembered globally as a genocide, Biafra came to be remembered as a humanitarian catastrophe. As such, it received sympathy and aid, but not the international recognition it so craved.

Holocaust Analogies in Postwar Literature: Nwapa, Emecheta, Saro-Wiwa

One might expect that these Holocaust analogies would fade away once the international observer team issued its report—or at least, once the war itself ended. But in fact the Holocaust analogy is a durable feature of the postwar literature, cropping up in novels and poetry about the war

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67 The teams were a military team from the OAU, a civilian team from the UN, and what is known at the “four-country team,” comprising representatives from the UK, Canada, Poland, and Sweden. The four-country team was by far the best known and best resourced team; they were also the only team to submit public reports. See Douglas Anthony, “‘What Are They Observing?’: The Accomplishments and Missed Opportunities of Observer Missions in the Nigerian Civil War,” *Journal of African Military History* 2, no. 2 (October 24, 2018): 87–118, [https://doi.org/10.1163/24680966-00202001](https://doi.org/10.1163/24680966-00202001).


69 Anthony, “‘What Are They Observing?’: The Accomplishments and Missed Opportunities of Observer Missions in the Nigerian Civil War,” 101. The only Biafran civilians the observers spoke with were prisoners of war or those who had had been trapped behind advancing Nigerian lines; all of these civilians were under the direct or indirect surveillance of Nigerian troops. In addition, Britain—the most powerful country on the team—was hardly a neutral party, having supported the Nigerian government with both arms and financial backing throughout the war. As Douglas points out, “serious questions emerged about the objectivity” of several British representatives. For example, the initial head of the mission was the managing director of an oil company involved in Nigeria’s oil sector, an apparent conflict of interest.
throughout the late 20th century. In these literary contexts, however, the analogy often functions in complex and critical ways—critiquing the Biafran government even as it registers the enormity of Nigerian violence against Biafra. Once the war ends, in other words, the Holocaust analogy no longer functions as a call for political recognition; postwar novels for the most part acknowledge that Biafra is dead. Instead, the Holocaust analogy is an attempt to shape postwar memory, to frame for posterity (and likely for the authors themselves) what was meaningful about Biafra. Like all forms of memory, this one is always as much about the present as the past—and thus the memory that these novels constellate changes with time, shapeshifting as the decades pass.

I am not the first to remark on the frequency of Holocaust analogies in Biafran war literature. Citing writers as diverse as Chinua Achebe, Chris Abani, Nnedi Okorafor, and Wole Soyinka, Chigbo Anyaduba has shown that such comparisons are a key strand in artistic depictions of the conflict from the 1970s through the present day. Anyaduba's critical response to such analogies is mixed. On the one hand, he argues, these comparisons are an attempt to "legitimize" the Biafran crisis as genocide, an instinct to which he is sympathetic. Yet he also suggests that such analogies may transform a complex conflict into a simple "story of evil," ungrounded in political and historical context. This critique, however, risks reading postwar novels in terms more appropriate for an analysis of wartime propaganda; it misses the flexibility and versatility with which postwar writers mobilized Holocaust analogies. Biafra novels of the 1970s and 80s frequently invoke the Holocaust in complex ways—not simply to frame Biafrans as victims of Nigerian genocide, but (often) also to criticize the Biafran government for dragging its people into a drawn-out and unwinnable war. In

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70 Two exceptions are S.O. Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* and Frederick Forsyth's *The Dogs of War*, both of which imagine utopian postwar futures for Biafra. The latter novel is discussed in Chapter 4.
many cases, that is, the Holocaust analogy functions simultaneously to memorialize Biafran suffering and to lay the blame for that suffering at the feet of the Biafran leadership.

Consider Flora Nwapa’s 1975 novel *Never Again*, one of Anyaduba’s central examples, which highlights the everyday suffering and heroism of Biafran women. The brief novel is narrated in the first person by Kate, an Igbo woman whose initial enthusiasm for Biafra has become tinged with cynicism as the war rages on. Anyaduba highlights a passage near the end of the novel where Kate returns to her home town of Ugwuta, which has been largely razed by attacking Nigerian troops. Kate vents her grief and anger through anguished repetition:

> What folly! What arrogance, what stupidity led us to this desolation, to this madness, to this wickedness, to this war, to this death? When this cruel war is over, there will be no more war. It will not happen again, never again. NEVER AGAIN, never again.74 (emphasis in original)

With Anyaduba, I read this anguished repetition of "never again" as an invocation of the anti-genocide rallying cry, which was well-established by the time of the book’s publication in 1975.75 In highlighting the titular *Never Again*, Anyaduba suggests, Nwapa draws on these associations to underscore the devastation the war has wrought and to articulate Kate's "commitment to witness atrocity."76 Yet threaded through her grief in these pages is also an indictment: Kate blames the Biafran leaders as much as the Nigerian "vandals" for the war's devastation. "What," she asks, "led us

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75 Raul Hilberg, “Is there a new Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg,” *Logos* 6, no. 1-2 (2007): n.p. See also Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schult, “Performative Holocaust Commemoration in the 21st Century,” *Holocaust Studies* 26, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 135–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2019.1578452; Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznaider, *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017). Though the phrase had been used in other contexts, it was firmly tied to the Holocaust by the late 1960s. Initially articulated by Buchenwald survivors upon the camp’s liberation, the phrase was later inscribed in a memorial plaque at Dachau (which became a memorial site in 1965). In 1961, the phrase was popularized by the Erwin Leiser documentary *Mein Kampf*, which challenged Nazi propaganda. (The film ends with a general shot of Auschwitz and the narrator’s words “It must never happen again—never again.”) However, its most significant dissemination was via ultra-nationalist rabbi Meir Kahane’s 1972 book *Never Again: A Program for Survival*. Over the last fifty years, as Popescu and Schultz note, the phrase has at times been seen as specific to the Holocaust and at other times used as a more general anti-genocide or anti-fascist rallying cry.
to this desolation," an emphasis that suggests the Biafrans themselves have contributed to their own suffering.\(^77\) Indeed, the novel’s very next scene depicts a group of Biafran soldiers stealing yams from a fleeing civilian family;\(^78\) a few pages later, Kate observes a well-connected acquaintance steal another civilian’s car in order to avoid wearing down his own. “That was Biafra,” she thinks wearily to herself.\(^79\) While those around her repeat government talking points for fear of being labeled saboteurs, Kate recognizes that the propaganda is simply a bid to deceive civilians about the extent of Biafran losses. At the novel’s end, gazing at the ruins of her home, she wishes that Biafran troops had not retaken the town—for if the Nigerians had held it, she thinks, the war might have ended.\(^80\) In this context, her desperate cry of “never again” is both an indictment of Nigerian violence and a cry of anger at the Biafran government’s insistence on fighting to the bitter end.

We see this double condemnation even more forcefully in Buchi Emecheta’s 1982 *Destination Biafra*. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the novel follows the journey of an upper-class Nigerian woman, Debbie, as she navigates the war’s ruinous effects on the civilian population. Emecheta’s final chapter is titled simply, “The Holocaust,” and at first glance, it seems to echo the Biafran propaganda claims discussed in the previous section. The chapter chronicles the aerial bombardment of the final strip of Biafran-held territory, a bombardment that Emecheta frames as an attack on “a defenseless city packed full of starving refugees,” designed to “wipe out whatever remained of Biafra.”\(^81\) When the bombing comes, many civilians are indeed killed—suggesting that Nigerian attacks on Biafra constitute precisely the threat of physical extermination that Biafran propaganda had always claimed.

\(^77\) Nwapa, *Never Again*, 70. Emphasis mine.
\(^78\) Nwapa, *Never Again*, 70-71.
\(^79\) Nwapa, *Never Again*, 76.
\(^80\) Nwapa, *Never Again*, 78.
Yet Emecheta’s narration of this scene makes clear that the Biafran leadership, too, is responsible for this shocking holocaust. The final Nigerian attack unfolds after the Biafran leader Abosi (a fictionalized version of the historical figure Ojukwu) refuses a peace deal and commits to fight on. At this point in the novel, five million Biafran survivors are packed into a small area of land, “completely surrounded” by Nigerian troops.82 “If he wants to die fighting,” asks one character bitterly, “why take millions of his people with him?”83 The protagonist, Debbie, concludes that the fight has become Abosi’s personal battle and is “no longer the people’s war.”84 This judgement is borne out when Abosi flees the enclave via a secret airlift, leaving his people to die in the Nigerian bombardment. Watching him escape the final conflagration, Debbie is enraged. She thinks of all the Biafran civilians who have been killed: from the “pitiful baby” to the starving children “who wanted plantain and chicken stew and could take no more” to the young mother raped on the roadside by soldiers.85 All of these innocent civilians, she concludes, have been betrayed by Abosi and the sycophants who surround him, leaders who have pursued their own dreams at the expense of their long-suffering people.86

Emecheta’s framing of the war’s bloody conclusion as a “Holocaust” thus does something more than simply underscore the gravity of Nigerian violence or rewrite the nature of that violence in "Eurocentric terms," as Anyaduba suggests.87 Here, the term “holocaust”—which in the context of the war’s rhetoric had seemed to refer to the attempted annihilation of European Jews—

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82 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 254.
83 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 254.
84 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 255.
85 Emecheta, Destination Biafra, 257.
86 A third guilty party, in Emecheta’s view, are the British. Before narrating the bombardment that ends the novel, Emecheta has Debbie point out to her English lover that the bombs about to fall are British-made and British-supplied. This critique of British involvement in the war does not undermine the responsibility of the Nigerian and Biafran leaders—if anything, it amplifies it. Both sides are guilty, Emecheta implies, because the leaders of both Nigeria and Biafra have allowed themselves to be coopted by Britain.
collapses back into its more general meanings of mass violence and, even older, the burnt offering of a sacrifice. Like Nwapa’s *Never Again*, then, *Destination Biafra* retains a powerful sense of moral condemnation while resisting the claims of genocide that were so central to wartime reporting and propaganda from within embattled Biafra. Instead, the novel lays responsibility for its holocaust at the feet of Biafran and Nigerian leaders alike.

*Destination Biafra’s* investment in critiquing leaders on both sides of the war may be connected to its author's family background. Although she lived in the UK throughout the war, Emecheta grew up in the Midwestern town of Ibuza, an Igbo town near Asaba, across the Niger from Biafra proper. As Marion Pape notes, Emecheta's Western Igbo background gives her a liminal position within Nigeria's politicized ethnic categories; though connected to Igbo identity, her novel never fully affiliates with Biafra. Indeed, in the author's foreword to *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta asserts the area in which she grew up continues to be "glossed over" in accounts of the war, despite suffering terrible abuses. The novel is an attempt to rectify those omissions, focusing as it does on the Asaba massacre and the larger sufferings of Igbo civilians of Midwestern background. *Destination Biafra* is dedicated to Emecheta's Midwestern friends and family who died in the war.

The position of the Western Igbos inverts and in some ways mirrors the position of non-Igbo minorities within Biafran territory. These peoples—the Ogoni, Ijaw, and Ikwerre, among others—were, like the Western Igbos, situated uneasily between the ostensibly clear-cut categories of "Nigerian" and "Biafran." No war novel represents this minority experience more forcefully than

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88 Biafran troops did invade and attempt to occupy the Midwest from August to early October 1967. After this brief, unsuccessful operation, the Midwest remained solidly under Nigerian control.
90 Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, vii.
91 Asaba, located on the west bank of the Niger, was retaken by Federal troops in early October 1967. A few days later, soldiers systematically executed nearly a thousand Igbo men and boys in one of the worst war crimes of the conflict. For an account of the massacre’s significance to both the Nigeria-Biafra war and to postwar Nigeria, see S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), which was published just a few years after *Destination Biafra* and follows the eponymous soldier boy as he joins the Biafran forces and loses his childish enthusiasm for the glamour of war. A prolific and versatile writer, Saro-Wiwa is today best known for his environmental activism, which focused on resisting the ecological devastation of Ogoni lands produced by reckless oil extraction in the Niger Delta. In *Sozaboy*, he depicts ecological and human devastation of another sort, offering a grim account of how the civil war laid waste to oil-rich Ogoni lands and futures.

When read in relation to other novels this dissertation considers, *Sozaboy* wears its historical context lightly: the names "Nigeria" and "Biafra" never once appear, nor do any recognizable historical figures or specific events. Yet in a prefatory author's note, Saro-Wiwa frames the story as a tale of the Nigerian Civil War, sparked by his observation of young soldiers in Bonny. During the war, Saro-Wiwa worked for the Federal government as an Administrator for Bonny (after its capture by Federal forces) and as a Commissioner and member of the executive council of Rivers State. His nonfiction account of the conflict, *On A Darkling Plain* (1989), is centrally concerned with Ogoni suffering and harshly critical of Ojukwu and other Igbo leaders during the war. Saro-Wiwa found Biafra to be just as oppressive of his people as Nigeria had been—indeed, he has described the Ogoni situation in both settings as one of internal colonization. As we shall see, *Sozaboy* shares this close focus on the Ogoni experience, a perspective that distinguishes it sharply from the other Nigerian novels examined in this dissertation.

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93 Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain*, 11-12.
In its attention to the Ogoni experience, Sozaboy suggests that Biafran rule offers its minority communities not liberation but a new form of oppression.\textsuperscript{94} This critique is evident in the novel on several levels, but I pursue it here by tracking one particular rhetorical choice: the novel's repeated invocation of Hitler—or rather, "Hitla," as the name is rendered in Sozaboy's signature rotten English.\textsuperscript{95} Though Hitla is, on the face of it, a strange figure through which to understand the Nigerian Civil War, he appears throughout the novel in characters' discussions of both past and the present. We can make sense of this surprising move by reading Sozaboy in light of the insistence—in the Biafra Sun and by Ojukwu himself—on figuring Gowon as “Nigeria’s Hitler,” a mad dictator whose goal is to “engulf the world in yet another terrible Holocaust.”\textsuperscript{96} By repeatedly invoking Hitla, in other words, Saro-Wiwa explicitly responds to one of the most common analogies of Biafran propaganda. Sozaboy invokes this analogy not to accuse the Nigerian government of genocide, however, but to develop a surprising parallel between WWII and the Nigerian Civil War: in both cases, Saro-Wiwa suggests, the Ogoni have been coopted by colonial powers into fighting a war that does not serve their interests. This parallel frames the Ogoni as distinct from the Biafrans and, indeed, as themselves a persecuted minority seeking self-determination. My reading is thus broadly consonant with Harry Garuba's argument that Sozaboy "enacts the logic of minority discourse," though I approach the novel from a different angle.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} Throughout the novel, references to the Khana language make clear that the protagonist, Mene, and his fellow villagers are Ogoni. Their village, Dukana, is located a few hours' drive from the nearest major city, Pitakwa (Port Harcourt).

\textsuperscript{95} As Saro-Wiwa explains in a prefatory author's note, this language is "disordered and disorderly," freely mixing "Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English" (n.p.). This "lawless" language absorbs and transforms standard English words, spitting them out in recognizable but nonidentical forms: "soldier boy" becomes "sozaboy," "Port Harcourt" becomes "Pitakwa," and "Hitler" becomes "Hitla" (n.p.).

\textsuperscript{96} Biafra Sun, July 18 1967, 2-3.

http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015042475585. Garuba does not discuss the figure of Hitla, focusing instead on the way in which the boy Mene is always paired with older, more experienced figures—a structure that he suggests allegorizes the experience of minorities such as the Ogoni, who were often lumped together with the more numerous and politically powerful Igbo. Garuba's framing of the novel as a political allegory centered on a child—but one that decenters Biafra—intriguingly complicates the argument of my second chapter.
Initially, *Sozaboy*’s references to Hitla seem historical: they enter the novel as part of an older character’s memories of fighting in WWII against the Nazi Reich. In the course of a long-winded chat with several fellow villagers, the old man Zaza recounts his experiences in the Burma campaign, fighting under British command alongside troops from many other colonies. As he tells the story, "Hitla" is everywhere—indeed, the name becomes a synecdoche for the Axis forces more broadly, who seem to Zaza omnipresent and indestructible. “Hitla plenty for that forest,” he recounts. “You kill Hitla today, tomorrow one hundred Hitla appear… we were fighting and cutting him for two years and then he will still come again after we have killed him.”98 “Hitla" functions here not as a particular historical figure, or even as a kind of archetypal evil, but rather as a way of naming the baffling absurdity of an apparently endless war. Hitla is everywhere and nowhere, flitting from tree ("like monkey") to bush ("like bad spirit") to trench ("like rabbit").99 The enemy's seemingly supernatural regenerative qualities ensure that Zaza's war is both unending and incomprehensible. "If you kill him twenty times," Zaza marvels, "he will return twenty one times."100 No matter how bravely and long Zaza fights, the war is never won. "This thing," he adds, "wondered me plenty."101

Zaza's account highlights the distance between the dominant British narrative of WWII and his own experience as a colonized subject fighting in far-off Burma. Thus we can read the textual distinction between "Hitler" and "Hitla" as a way of demarcating a conventional liberal British perspective on the war—which is never articulated in the novel—with Zaza's eerie, exciting, and baffling experience on the ground in Asia. If "Hitler" denotes fascism, genocide, or territorial conquest, then we might read "Hitla" as the Nazi leader's colonial refraction. As such, "Hitla" articulates both difference and similarity, gesturing to the fact that WWII unfolded within a world-

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system fundamentally structured by colonization. As the novel's extended discussion of salt scarcity makes clear, the apparent backwater of Dukana is in fact intimately connected to networks of global colonial trade—a connection that is particularly salient in wartime. Nigerian resources such as palm oil, rubber, and timber were, historically speaking, essential to the success of the British war effort. As Zaza's story makes clear, those colonial assets took the form of human capital as well as natural resources.

Zaza's experience of WWII forms both the historical backdrop and the comparative framework against which Mene's experience of the Nigeria-Biafra war unfolds. Indeed, Saro-Wiwa's insistent textual parallels invite the reader to interpret Mene's war as a kind of re-enactment of Zaza's war, twenty-five years prior. Early in the novel, a telltale sign of the start of the Biafran war is the high price of salt in the market. The salt scarcity reminds village elders of “that time of Hitla,” when disruptions to global supply chains meant that salt was also in short supply; it is this memory, in fact, that sparks Zaza's long account of his experiences in Burma. Moreover, Zaza's account of his own reasons for joining the army presage Mene's: both boys are attracted by soldiers' sharp uniforms and the prospect of impressing women. Zaza warns that war entails horrors such as drinking one's own urine; Mene later finds this to be true. In fact, Mene absorbs Zaza's account so fully that he initially reads his own enemy as "Hitla" and intends to fight "not just for Dukana but for Burma"—an absurd claim that suggests how little the boy really understands of the war he plans

104 Korieh, Nigeria and World War II, 4. Korieh notes that British colonial subjects “were forced not only to fight in the war and to feed its participants but to pay for it as well.” To that end, Nigeria maximized exports of palm oil, rubber, and timber.
105 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 26.
106 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 27, 35.
107 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 30, 103.
to join. At the same time, this framing also underscores the war's foreignness: a young Ogoni boy, the novel suggests, may as well fight for Burma as for Biafra.

Read in conjunction with Saro-Wiwa's other writings about the Ogoni, Sozaboy suggests that the push for Biafran self-determination was grounded in a kind of internal colonization of Eastern minorities and their oil-rich land. Here, Sozaboy's insistent parallelism is particularly instructive, for the novel makes clear that Zaza's experience fighting for the British was essentially structured by colonialism—indeed, Zaza's very entry into the army is mediated by a British D.O., or district officer. Twenty-some years later, Mene's entry into the army is also facilitated by a D.O., in this case presumably a Biafran official (though the text refers to them identically). Even after Mene has learned that the war is not what he had dreamed of, he refers to himself as "like Burma soza of olden days," suggesting that his repeated reliance on Zaza's language to describe his own experience is something more than simple naivete. Indeed, we can read this description—coming after Mene has experienced the horrors of war—as a recognition that he, like Zaza, has been manipulated by outside interests to prosecute a war that does not serve his community well. In framing the present as well as the past in terms of a fight against "Hitla," that is, Saro-Wiwa invokes not the historical figure but the repeated Ogoni experience of being drafted into other people's wars.

One important consequence of this framing is to undercut Biafran claims that they were fighting a "war of survival" against an implacable and indeed genocidal enemy. Instead, Saro-Wiwa depicts a brutal and pointless conflict repeatedly justified by the tautology "war is war."

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108 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 54, 35.
109 Ken Saro-Wiwa, Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy (London: Saros International Publishers, 1992), 28. Saro-Wiwa writes that Ojukwu “wanted to control the oil of the Ogoni and other delta minorities. He calculated that if the resources of these people were in the hands of his new kingdom, the latter would be extremely well off.”
110 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 26-27.
111 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 51.
112 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 144.
114 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 75, 80, 104.
Mene himself fights on the side of the Biafran rebels, it is easy as a reader to lose track of this allegiance: Saro-Wiwa gives his young soldier no ideology, no uniform, and no consistent leadership or set of goals. Indeed, Mene himself quickly deduces that there is little difference between his comrades and the men pointed out as enemy soldiers. “I will not allow anybody to tell me that this is enemy and the other one is not enemy,” he asserts—for in fact, all the soldiers are “two and two pence”—that is, interchangeable.\textsuperscript{115} Later in the novel, this suspicion is (literally) confirmed. A soldier that he initially encountered as a comrade seems, in fact, to be fighting for the enemy. Then, astonishingly, the very same soldier appears “now again with our own sozas.” Mene cannot believe his eyes. How can this one man "be fighting on two sides of the same war”?\textsuperscript{116}

The soldiers' interchangeability comments implicitly on the legitimacy of Biafran group identity, with implications for claims of both genocide and self-determination. If Mene cannot distinguish between the Biafrans and the Nigerians—and if soldiers switch from one side to the other with such ease—then who is to say the groups are really different at all? And if Nigerians and Biafrans are not really different from each other, then claims that the former is carrying out a genocide against the latter become nonsensical—for genocide is defined as an attack on a distinct and identifiable group. Similarly, the logic of self-determination is framed around “a people”\textsuperscript{117}—a formulation that, while flexible, certainly requires some mode of distinguishing between Nigerians and Biafrans. \textit{Sozaboy} gives the reader no way of making these distinctions, instead immersing the reader in Mene’s confused experience of trying to survive a conflict in which allegiance and indeed identity are ever shifting. When Mene re-encounters Zaza late in the novel, the old man notes that

\textsuperscript{115} Saro-Wiwa, \textit{Sozaboy}, 139.
\textsuperscript{116} Saro-Wiwa, \textit{Sozaboy}, 166.
two of their fellow villagers are safe and well, although "among the enemy" in Nigerian-occupied land. They remain "among friends" in Biafran territory, however, are being hunted "like animals" by those professed friends. Like the mysterious Manmuswak, the categories of 'friend' and 'enemy' turn out to be distressingly slippery: neither ethnicity nor ideology provide a reliable marker with which to distinguish security from danger.

This narrative of the war produces an account of sovereignty quite different than that described by Biafran propaganda. Where the propaganda discussed in this chapter is ultimately oriented toward state recognition—Biafra as the new Israel, protecting its long-suffering people—Sozaboy's world is structured by what political theorists might identify as a state of exception. By the novel's end, Mene has fled the army and, desperately seeking his wife and mother, finds himself in a camp for displaced civilians. The experience is ghastly:

This camp is proper human compost pit and all those people they are calling refugees are actually people that they have throwaway like rubbish. Nothing that you can use them for. They have nothing in this world...I am telling you, the first time that I went inside one camp, I almost run because I think that I have reached the town of ghost, or ghost town as some people call it.

Mene's description of the camp as a "ghost town" and "compost pit" for "throwaway" people calls to mind Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics, in which sovereignty consists of the capacity to define "who is disposable and who is not" and to confer on the former the status of "living dead."

From this perspective, Biafran sovereignty inheres in the power to create and manage these camps full of rubbish, the power to decide "who may live and who must die." This framing of

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118 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 146.
119 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 146.
120 Because the territory that Biafra lost to Federal troops was disproportionately outside of Igboland proper, the displaced people who sought shelter in Biafran camps were disproportionately non-Igbo minorities.
121 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 148.
122 Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, 27, 39.
sovereignty is, as Mbembe notes, grounded in the Foucauldian notion of biopower and rather distanced from more traditional modes of conceptualizing sovereignty in international relations, such as territorial control, border regulation, and state-to-state diplomacy. Yet one of the crucial contributions of Mbembe's thought is to frame the colonial territory as a state of exception analogous to the Nazi concentration camp, expanding Foucault's (and Agamben's) central metaphor. So although Saro-Wiwa does not directly invoke the Nazi genocide, the rich tradition of thinking between the colonized territory and the concentration camp is illuminating here, too. Ultimately, the resonance between Mene's and Mbembe's accounts of the camp highlight the gulf between Biafran rhetoric and the grim experience of its minority peoples, gesturing towards the necropolitical power behind the promise of self-determination.

In the end, Saro-Wiwa appropriates the rhetoric of genocide to describe not the Biafran experience within Nigeria, but the Ogoni experience within Biafra. Seven years after the publication of Sozaboy, Saro-Wiwa authored a short nonfiction book titled Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy. The book develops a critical history of Ogoni exploitation from the colonial period through the present day, culminating in a call for Ogoni political autonomy. In the context of this history, the brief "biafran" interlude—Saro-Wiwa refuses to capitalize the word—is simply one more attempt by external forces to dominate the Delta minorities and appropriate their oil.124 The Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa writes, "resented the attempt to corral them willy-nilly into a new and untested nation where they would most likely be treated as slaves."125 In his attention to attacks on Ogoni civilians and his sharp critique of Ojukwu, Saro-Wiwa reworks ideas that he had previously expressed in his 1989 account of the civil war, On a Darkling Plain. What is new here is the concept of genocide, which Saro-Wiwa uses throughout the book to articulate the particular experience of Ogoni victimization. As if

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125 Saro-Wiwa, Genocide in Nigeria, 27. Saro-Wiwa goes into greater detail about the sufferings of the Ogoni (and other Delta minorities) during the war in On a Darkling Plain.
anticipating pushback, he directly cites the Genocide Convention in a prefatory note and tartly requests that "if anyone, after reading this book, has any further doubt of, or has a better description for, the crime against the Ogoni people, I will be happy to know it."\(^\text{126}\) I can only speculate as to whether the frequent invocation of genocide during the civil war suggested to Saro-Wiwa that this legal framework might also be applicable to the situation of the Ogoni; regardless, it is a striking reappropriation of a discourse that most readers of Biafran war literature have come to associate with Biafran claims against Nigeria.

Although Saro-Wiwa's focus on Biafra's suppression of its own minorities is unusual, his account of the war in *Sogaboy* shares the sense of futility and waste that characterize *Never Again* and *Destination Biafra*. Written in the 1970s and 80s by writers whose home communities were ravaged by the war, all three of these novels are deeply skeptical of the war propaganda's easy analogies. Their visceral depictions of the war's violence and wreckage are marked by a kind of weary anger, which is directed towards the Biafran authorities as much as the Nigerian "enemy." Indeed, these writers' tendency to critically reroute Holocaust analogies seems to stem from a recognition that the war's toll on civilians—of whatever ethnic background—was materially worsened by Ojukwu's commitment to continue the fight at all costs. Thus, I read these postwar novels' engagement with the Holocaust analogy as something more ambivalent than an attempt to "legitimize" Biafran suffering through comparison.\(^\text{127}\) Memory here functions not only to memorialize losses, but to critique the Biafran leadership's commitment to fight to the bitter end—the very commitment, ironically, that the propaganda campaign was initially designed to support.

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Writing and Reading Biafra in the 21st Century: Adichie and Okorafor

The first half of this chapter has engaged with Biafra novels of the 1970s and 80s, novels written shortly after the war by writers who experienced firsthand the violence and/or the contemporaneous news coverage. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to two more recent novels: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* (2010), both of which mobilize the ethical and emotional resources of Biafran war memory to comment on the problem of genocide. This part of my argument focuses on how these 21st century novels engage with a different African genocide: the conflict in Darfur, which peaked in 2003-2006. Grounded as they are in distinct genres, the two novels take quite different approaches. Despite the widespread tendency by critics and readers to connect *Half of a Yellow Sun* to Darfur, Adichie resists this relationship. In focusing on Biafra as Biafra, she instead reinvents Biafra memory for a new generation—preserving the Holocaust analogy as a marker of how people were thinking at the time, but simultaneously signaling her own distance from it. *Who Fears Death*, in contrast, focuses entirely on developing a set of parallels to Darfur—using the resources of speculative fiction to develop a legal framework for sexual violence as constitutive of genocide.

I begin with Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a global bestseller that uses a series of interconnected family dramas to narrate the war’s losses. As Adichie explains in an author’s note, the novel draws on both her own family stories—her parents lived through the war—and extensive research. Indeed, *Half of a Yellow Sun* nods to many of the novels, reporting, and propaganda discussed in this dissertation. Adichie’s research and personal experience (she grew up in Nsukka, one of the novel’s major settings) give the book a concrete specificity rooted in sensory and historical detail; one such detail is the circulation of the Holocaust analogy. Yet in Adichie’s treatment of this analogy, we see an almost playful distance uncharacteristic of the earlier novels.
This approach is most visible in the novel’s only direct discussion of genocide, which occurs during a genial conversation among friends, well before the harshest days of the war. Odenigbo, a professor and intellectual, argues that the Holocaust “would not have happened” if Europe had cared more about Africa. Questioned by his listeners, he argues that Nazi ideas of white supremacy—and the attempts to exterminate “inferior” races—were first worked out in the colonies. Referencing the Herero genocide in German South West Africa, he insists that Europeans “started their race studies with the Hereros and concluded with the Jews.” Odenigbo’s framing of the relationship between the Holocaust and genocide in Africa in effect flips the traditional Holocaust analogy on its head: rather than understanding Biafra as an iteration of earlier genocide in Europe, it is the Holocaust that is the aftereffect. Channeling the thinking of Aimé Césaire and others discussed at the start of this chapter, Odenigbo proposes that colonial violence in the “periphery” comes home to the metropole. Seen through this longer temporal lens, genocidal violence in Africa anticipates the Holocaust rather than replicating it.

Even as she reconfigures that analogy, though, Adichie also attenuates its power. While Biafran propaganda used the Holocaust to name the enormity of the violence Biafrans faced—as an unignorable call to action—Adichie frames Odenigbo’s arguments with far less urgency. The relevant scene occurs early in the novel, before the war begins. The setting is a casual gathering in Odenigbo’s living room; the walls are packed with books, drinks are flowing, old friends are teasing each other. The characters present—Okeoma, Odenigbo, Prof. Ezeka, Dr. Patel, Miss Adebayo—are not government officials but academics and poets. As John Marx notes, the living room conversations become a way of “reproducing the feel of the seminar or colloquium when the universities are all closed.”

129 Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 63.
seem to take pleasure in argument for argument’s sake. Miss Adebayo playfully dismisses Odenigbo as a “sophist.” Olanna, who is new to the group, observes that they all seem to laugh in concert, “as if they had had different variations of this conversation so many times that they knew just when to laugh.” Odenigbo speaks about the Holocaust, and the Herero genocide, in the past tense—a contrast with much of the activist propaganda, which figures the Holocaust and Biafra as simultaneous and ongoing. The Holocaust analogy certainly interests these intellectuals, but it is a matter of theoretical argument, not (yet) a fervent political or emotional appeal.

Adichie builds a final form of distance via the focalization of this scene: all of the political debate unfolds through Olanna’s eyes, and Olanna has other matters on her mind. The arriving guests have interrupted her and Odenigbo having sex, and Olanna can’t quite bring her mind back to the conversation at hand. When Odenigbo flings his hand into the air while discussing the Eichmann trial, Olanna remembers that hand grasping her waist. When he raises his voice, she recalls how loud they had been. When he sips his drink, she remembers his lips on her body. Because the whole scene is written in free indirect discourse through Olanna’s perspective, the effect of her preoccupation is to constantly interrupt the discussion about genocide and colonialism with Olanna’s awareness of her own body and desire for the guests to leave. Even more powerfully than the setting and tone discussed above, the focalization of this scene distances the reader from any deep emotional attachment to the arguments Odenigbo and the others develop. By introducing the Holocaust analogy in this way, Adichie acknowledges the power—and, indeed, the intellectual relevance—of the trope. But she also subordinates it to the stuff of daily life—Miss Adebayo’s defensiveness in relation to Olanna’s beauty, Olanna’s desire, Olanna’s slight sense of exclusion.

131 Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 63.
132 Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 63.
133 Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 62.
134 Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 63.
135 Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 62.
from the group—and, in this way, gives it less power than, for instance, Nwapa or Emecheta’s anguished comparisons to the Holocaust.

This genial distancing is at least in part a product of the distinct eras in which these novels were published. Whereas Saro-Wiwa argues emphatically with an analogy whose rhetorical power he directly encountered, Adichie acknowledges the trope without embracing it. The urgency of responding to this particular analogy has passed. That shift in treatment speaks to both the shift in Holocaust memory between the mid-1980s and the early twenty-first century, and the fading of the dream of Biafran sovereignty. The idea that the Biafran conflict is “like” the Holocaust in any meaningful way is harder to articulate by 2006, when global Holocaust memory has made such comparisons less palatable—and the notion of Biafran sovereignty feels like a relic from another time.\(^{136}\) So the reference to the Holocaust analogy is less an invocation of an argument and more a nod to an intellectual history—meaningful primarily as part of the Biafra-specific memory that Adichie constructs.

Adichie’s careful handling of the past did not prevent readers and critics from latching on to a contemporary analogy, however. As I noted at the start of this chapter, *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been persistently read in terms of the conflict in Darfur, a frequent presence in international headlines at the time the novel was released. Though sustained fighting in western Sudan had begun several years prior, the violence in the region became particularly visible in the US and UK in 2005 and 2006—years that saw a failed peace agreement, contentious Security Council debates about a proposed peacekeeping force, and the rise of the Save Darfur movement. Whether or not the violence in

\(^{136}\) Since Adichie's novel was published, the idea of Biafran sovereignty has been reinvigorated by the activism of groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). But in 2006, IPOB did not yet exist and MASSOB was much less visible than it would become in the 2010s.
Darfur constituted genocide was and is contested, but certainly claims of genocide galvanized journalism and public opinion in many parts of world, particularly the US.\footnote{A strong activist movement in the US, exemplified by the Save Darfur coalition, used the language of genocide forcefully and repeatedly. In June 2004, resolutions declaring the violence to be genocide passed the US House and Senate unanimously. A number of other countries made similar statements. The UN and AU, in contrast, both acknowledged mass violence but concluded that the violence did not constitute genocide. For an overview of arguments on both sides, see Chapter 5 of Prunier, \textit{Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide}.}

In this context, it was perhaps inevitable that \textit{Half of a Yellow Sun} would be read in relation to the ongoing violence in another African state. I began this chapter with a quote from a review that linked Adichie’s novel to two recent genocides: “Before Darfur, before Rwanda, there was Biafra.” This language, from political reporter Lee Aitken, was not an isolated occurrence; both reviews and reader responses frequently connected \textit{Half of a Yellow Sun} to the then-current violence in Darfur.\footnote{For example, a glowing 2006 review in the \textit{Globe and Mail} noted that \textit{Half of a Yellow Sun} is “extremely timely” given “the horror that is present-day Darfur.” See Lisa Moore, “. . . And All of a Brilliant Novel,” \textit{Globe and Mail}, October 21, 2006, \url{https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/and-all-of-a-brilliant-novel/article714391/}.}

What might account for the ease with which critics and readers read Adichie’s novel as a commentary on contemporary violence in Darfur? There is little in the novel itself to justify this comparison, other than the basic commonality of an African conflict rooted in part in regional tensions.\footnote{The tendency of some US activist groups to falsely portray the Darfur conflict as an attack by an Islamic government on Christian civilians may have suggested another parallel to the Nigeria-Biafra war, which activists framed in similar terms. See Jodi Eichler-Levine and Rosemary R. Hicks, “‘As Americans against Genocide’: The Crisis in Darfur and Interreligious Political Activism,” \textit{American Quarterly} 59, no. 3 (2007): 711–35, 715.} Adichie’s novel is deeply realist and consistently grounded in the specificity of 1960s Biafra and Nigeria. Indeed, it does not engage at any length with the most obvious parallel between Biafra and Darfur, which is the remarkable strength of the international activist movements that each conflict mobilized.

Moreover, Adichie herself has consistently rejected analogies between her novel’s historical setting and the situation in Darfur in the early 2000s. In a 2007 interview with the London \textit{Times}, for instance, she asserted that “it’s not Darfur…it’s not sexy like Darfur.”\footnote{Ben Hoyle, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the power of novels,” \textit{Times}, March 24, 2012, \url{https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-on-the-power-of-novels-zgtn776vp05}.}
she recalled worrying that the book would be unintelligible to US readers because "it’s not about Darfur."¹⁴¹ When an interviewer from Poets and Writers asked her if some of the novel’s resonance for readers was due to “Darfur or Rwanda—this image of Africa in crisis,” Adichie again pushed back:

I hope not because I don’t see it as a book about Africa in crisis. That’s not at all what I wanted it to be. I wanted it instead to challenge the idea that Africa is just a place where people die of war, and we don’t see the other side. Rather than reminding people of Rwanda or Darfur, I think it surprises people who say it reminded them of their own stories. That’s what I like to hear—reminding you of the humanity of the African, whether caught up in a war, being in love, whatever.¹⁴²

In rejecting the analogy between Biafra and Darfur, Adichie redirects the reader’s attention to the human stories that unfold within and in relation to the larger conflict she depicts. This resistance to analogy marks a shift from both the Biafran propaganda and the Biafra novels of the 1970s and 80s. In the propaganda, analogy elevates the violence in Biafra to something universally recognizable as unacceptable: genocide. By making the violence legible as a new Holocaust, Biafran propagandists re-fashion Biafra conceptually as a new Israel and demand international recognition. In the earlier novels, the language of the Holocaust becomes a mode of both mourning the war's losses and laying those losses at the feet of the Biafran, as well as the Nigerian, government. For Adichie, writing decades later, both the international context and the stakes of comparison have changed. Unlike the Holocaust, Darfur—“the ambiguous genocide”—offers little conceptually to someone trying to establish categorically that the violence in Biafra did constitute genocide. Nor is Adichie really invested in establishing the Biafran experience as genocide, given that the promise of Biafran political independence has receded. Rather, her project is to remember the conflict as it happened, as tragedy rather than romance. In effect, Half of a Yellow Sun sidesteps Rothberg’s invitation to

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multidirectional memory—perhaps because Adichie does not trust that potential readers of her novel are willing to, as Rothberg's method requires, take dissimilarity for granted. Given the novel's global reach—and the tendency of non-Nigerian readers to understand an unfamiliar history via comparison—Adichie’s focused realism insists instead on the concrete specificity of the Biafran context, establishing the "reality" of the novel's fictional world.\footnote{Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in The Rustle of Language (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1989):141-48.} This is how it was, she seems to say. \textit{This is how it smelt, felt, tasted}. That Adichie herself was not there is beside the point; \textit{Half of a Yellow Sun} aims, like all realist fiction, at the illusion of reality. In doing so, it offers readers a way into a likely-unfamiliar conflict: not through analogy, but through the imagined sensory details of what it might have been like.

\textit{Half of a Yellow Sun} is an inflection point in the trajectory this chapter charts: written with an attention to the trope of the Holocaust analogy, but increasingly read as commentary on much more recent genocides. In the last part of this chapter, I take up a novel whose treatment of genocide functions as a kind of photo negative of Adichie’s: Nnedi Okorafor’s 2010 speculative fantasy \textit{Who Fears Death}. Where Adichie resists critics who want to link her novel to contemporary conflicts, Okorafor embraces the power of analogy to make connections across time and space. Indeed, “analogy” may be too narrow a word to describe what Okorafor does: perhaps it’s more accurate to say that she marshals the imaginative resources of Biafra to develop an extended meditation on contemporary mass violence. While other novels discussed here reflect on Biafra by directly depicting (a version of) the war itself, \textit{Who Fears Death} uses the intellectual and emotional resources of the Biafran past to examine the nature of genocide in the contemporary moment of the novel’s writing. Having developed that analysis, the novel then invites readers to reexamine the past in light of the present—a striking instance of multidirectional memory.
Who Fears Death is a fantastical coming of age tale set in a post-apocalyptic future Africa. Okorafor’s Seven Rivers Kingdom is wracked by conflict between the dark-skinned Okeke and light-skinned Nuru; centuries of oppression of the former by the latter have led to an ill-fated Okeke rebellion, which Nuru leaders crush with genocidal violence. The novel follows a teenage girl, Onyesonwu, as she comes into her powers as a sorcerer. Marked an outcast by her unusually light skin, she travels across a ravaged Saharan landscape in a quest to find and kill the Nuru warlord responsible for masterminding the genocide. Characters refer occasionally to the “Old Africa Era”—perhaps something like our present day—but Onyesonwu’s world no longer remembers the colonial or postcolonial eras as we know them. Computers and technology akin to GPS and air conditioners exist, but they are old and decrepit and the knowledge used to create them has been lost. Christianity and Islam have vanished without a trace. The central religious text is instead a version of Amos Tutuola’s The Palm Wine Drinkard, mutated by centuries of transmission and translation. The novel has seen substantial commercial and critical success; nominated for the Nebula, it won the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel and is currently being developed into an HBO series.

Though Who Fears Death does not invoke the Biafran context as directly as the other novels this dissertation considers, Okorafor herself has suggested that the story is shaped by that history. “When I was writing about genocide in Who Fears Death,” she notes, “I mined from my own family background.” (Okorafor’s parents were Igbo students who left Biafra for the US in 1969, in part to escape the war.) “In my family,” she has said, “the ghosts of the Biafran War hover.”

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146 Quoted in Hand, “The Speculative Fiction of UB Faculty Member Nnedi Okorafor.”
her futuristic graphic novel *LaGuardia*.

The world she depicts in *Who Fears Death* is also saturated with Igbo culture (even as it incorporates references to cultures and histories from across the continent). The protagonist's name, Onyesonwu, is Igbo. The Kingdom's magical realm is structured by four "mystic points," known as Okike, Alusi, Mmuo, and Uwa—all Igbo religious concepts.

A central plot point operates around Nsibidi, a writing system indigenous to southeastern Nigeria that Okorafor invests with magical power. Meetings in the protagonist's hometown of Jwahir open with a call and response of "Jwahir, kwenu!" and "Yah!", a repurposing of the conventional "Igbo kwenu!" with which gatherings in Igboland open. This emphasis on Igbo language and practices, when juxtaposed with Okorafor's stated commitment to writing about Biafra, suggests that we can fruitfully read *Who Fears Death* as a Biafra novel.

At the heart of the novel is Okorafor's insistence that the Nuru violence against the Okeke constitutes genocide: this framing is presented as a matter of fact in the first chapter, and reinforced throughout the novel. Within this larger framing, the prominence accorded to sexual violence is striking. Okorafor depicts rape as a pervasive feature of the conflict; the novel's protagonist, Onyesonwu, is a child of rape and this point is central to the plot (which centers on her quest to find and kill her father). Rather than focus primarily on individual trauma and healing, however, Okorafor repeatedly returns to the ways in which mass violence against Okeke women threatens Okeke society as a whole. More specifically, she depicts sexual violence as a considered Nuru tactic to destroy Okeke communities rather than (only) a violation of individual rights. This framing

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150 This element of Okorafor's work has thus far escaped critical attention. Indeed, the one piece that explores Okorafor's "speculative metaphor" of Okeke-Nuru conflict reads that conflict as a figure for the transatlantic slave trade and the oppression of Black people in the Americas. See Joshua Yu Burnett, "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 46, no. 4 (2015): 133–50, [https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.46.4.133](https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.46.4.133).

ultimately suggests that rape may itself function as a form of genocide, a mode of “destroy[ing]…in part”, as the Genocide Convention has it, a “national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.”

The novel links sexual violence to genocide on a number of levels, some of which follow established legal thinking and some of which articulate new frameworks. First, the rape of Okeke women by Nuru men is an attempt to impregnate those women and force them to bear their rapists’ children. In describing these rape scenes, Okorafor repeatedly writes that the Nuru rapists “wanted to make an Ewu child.” (Ewu is the term that Okorafor invents to describe a child of rape, an unusually light-skinned person whose appearance blends the features of her Nuru father and Okeke mother.) The phrase directly echoes a Washington Post article on sexual violence in Darfur that Okorafor cites in the acknowledgments. The article, titled “We Want to Make a Light Baby,” focuses on the tactical use of rape to damage family structure among targeted Fur, Massalit, and Zaghawa communities. Okorafor frames this article as a key inspiration for the novel as a whole, writing that its account of sexual violence in Sudan “created the passageway through which Onyesonwu slipped into my world.” Indeed, the novel’s depiction of sexual violence echoes the Post article in suggesting that the motive for rape is not only to terrify, but to force women to bear their attackers’ children. Ewu children are outcasts in Okeke society, seen as inherently violent due to the conditions of their conception; they are always Ewu, never Okeke. Thus the forced impregnation of Okeke women by Nuru men is, in Okorafor’s framing, an attempt to “destroy Okeke families at the very root.”

This framing of genocidal rape gives novelistic form to a strand of feminist legal theory that had emerged out of attempts to pursue justice following the genocide in Bosnia in the early 1990s. The nature of the sexual violence in Bosnia—the use of rape as an instrument of ethnic cleansing, and particularly the use of forced pregnancy—sparked new thinking about the relationship between rape and genocide. In 1994, Catherine MacKinnon argued forcefully that such forms of violence can constitute genocide.\textsuperscript{157} Two years later, Beverly Allen’s book \textit{Rape Warfare} made a similar argument in greater detail, drawing on narrative accounts of women held in Serb rape and death camps.\textsuperscript{158} Allen concluded that international law as it then stood did not provide adequate legal protections against genocidal rape; she suggested that the best path forward lay in prosecuting such violence as biological warfare. The strangeness of this suggestion, twenty five years later, suggests both how new the concept of genocidal rape was, and how fully it was framed around unwanted pregnancy.

\textit{Who Fears Death} incorporates this framework through the figure of Onyesonwu, who is shunned and abused by her Okeke relatives for her \textit{Ewu} status—but the novel also moves beyond it, emphasizing the ways in which wartime sexual violence destroys family structure even when no children result. At several points throughout the novel, a woman survives rape only to be rejected by her family and community. Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba, for instance, survives an attack only to be rejected by her husband. Just a few days before, the couple had seen five falling stars—a sign, Najeeba thinks, that they will have five children together.\textsuperscript{159} With the Nuru attack, that future is foreclosed; Najeeba flees and rebuilds her life elsewhere, as the single mother of her attacker's child. In a similar incident set twenty years later, this pattern continues. Towards the end of Onyesonwu's quest, she reaches a village in the west that has been recently attacked by Nuru raiders. The survivors

\textsuperscript{159} Okorafor, \textit{Who Fears Death}, 17.
there include a badly disfigured man who reports that he has killed his own wife because she became pregnant after being raped by the Nuru attackers. “I killed her,” he reports, “and the evil thing growing inside of her.”

Here too, the purpose of the attack is to both force Okeke women to bear *Ewu* children and—in concert with the Okeke’s own honor culture—to render women unmarriageable and thus reduce the possibility of their bearing Okeke children in the future. By undermining marriages and families, Okorafor implies, such attacks threaten the biological and cultural reproduction of the broader Okeke community.

Such effects are felt, the novel suggests, even by those who are not directly attacked. Early in the novel, Onyesonwu finds herself transfixed by the words of a young female storyteller who is visiting Jwahir. The storyteller comes from the west and bears stories of terrible violence: she has witnessed the murder of her brothers and father as well as the rape and abduction of her mother by Nuru attackers. As a result, the storyteller vows to permanently reject sex and marriage. “I have no children,” she tells the assembled listeners in Jwahir. “My storyteller lineage will die with me. I can’t bear the hands of a man on me.” (Okorafor underlines the point by having Onyesonwu notice that the drummer who accompanies the storyteller is in love with her—and that because of the storyteller’s past trauma, the drummer’s love was “doomed.”) Since the storyteller has been trained to her role by her parents and grandparents, her decision to let that lineage end highlights the vulnerability of Okeke cultural heritage: what histories, myths, and knowledge will be lost with her death? This episode thus speaks to the ways in which targeted sexual violence threatens the cultural as well as biological reproduction of the Okeke community. That the storyteller has not herself been directly attacked underscores the effectiveness of this strategy; it has ripple effects that disrupt Okeke society on multiple levels and at varying timescales.

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162 Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*, 94
Okorafor's framing of the harms of sexual violence in these passages is broadly consonant with more recent shifts in the jurisprudence of international criminal law. Of particular relevance is the 1998 Akayesu decision of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, the first conviction for genocide in international criminal law. That case concerned the command responsibility of Jean-Paul Akayesu, a former bourgmestre (mayor) of Taba commune, who was accused of organizing and supervising the genocide in the Taba area. Akayesu's genocide conviction was grounded in part in his orchestration of sexual violence; the verdict specified that “rape…and sexual assault constitute acts of genocide insofar as they were committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a targeted group, as such.” The court noted further that sexual assault was “an integral part” of the genocidaires’ attempt to destroy the Tutsi ethnic group. Notably, the reasoning in Akayesu did not emphasize forced pregnancy so much as the destructive psychological and social effects of mass rape. In effect, this is the claim that Who Fears Death explores in fiction.

Okorafor’s depiction of genocide, in other words, picks up and fleshes out a new line of legal thought that had begun to take shape in the 1990s. In depicting sexual violence as central to the Nuru genocide—and in basing the Okeke-Nuru conflict so explicitly on Darfur—Okorafor frames rape in Darfur as a potentially genocidal form of violence. At the time of the novel’s publication in 2010, this analysis had not yet been articulated in legal terms. The previous year, Sudan’s president Omar al-Bashir had been charged by the International Criminal Court with war crimes and crimes

165 Although the novel is set in the far future, Okorafor explicitly situates the Okeke-Nuru conflict in the western part of “what was once the Sudan.” The novel’s depiction of racialized violence—in which “black” is used as a derogatory epithet—also accords with news reports from Darfur the early 2000s, including the Washington Post article that Okorafor cites in her acknowledgments.
against humanity, but not with genocide.\(^{166}\) (Rape was named in the arrest warrant as a crime against humanity.\(^{167}\)) However, in July 2010, shortly after the novel's publication, the ICC issued an updated arrest warrant including three counts of genocide; one of those counts was for “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” and was grounded in evidence of mass rape.\(^{168}\) The updated warrant, in other words, suggested that there were “reasonable grounds to believe” that Bashir was criminally responsible for genocidal rape, an analysis that dovetailed neatly with the logic underlying Okorafor’s speculative world.

Whether the warrant’s logic will ultimately offer a new jurisprudential reading of the relationship between sexual violence and genocide remains to be seen: since Bashir is still at large, the case has not been tried. Bashir’s is also the only ICC case in which rape has been framed as a potentially genocidal form of violence, so the 1998 \textit{Akayesu} decision remains the primary legal antecedent for this line of thought.\(^{169}\) Still, the fact that this analysis has now been articulated within the ICC suggests that it may be moving towards the legal mainstream. I read \textit{Who Fears Death} as a kind of translation of these legal questions into the realm of popular fiction, a novel that habituates its readers to the idea that sexual violence might constitute genocide—without ever spelling that argument out directly. In invoking the geographic terrain of Darfur in particular, it invites readers to use the futuristic saga of the Okeke and the Nuru as a frame for imagining justice in the present.

\(^{166}\) The ICC was established in via the Rome Statute, which was adopted in 1998 (the year of the \textit{Akayesu} decision) and entered into force in 2002. The ICC was in many ways modeled on the ICTR and ICTY, but was designed to be a permanent standing court rather than an ad hoc tribunal with a narrow field of action. The ICC’s remit is four core crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggression.

\(^{167}\) International Criminal Court, Warrant for the Arrest of Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, March 4 2009, https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2009_01514.PDF. The ICC’s founding statute names rape explicitly as a war crime but not (explicitly) as a form of genocide, relying instead on the Genocide Convention’s language. Yet \textit{Akayesu} had opened a door; should the ICC wish to follow the ICTR’s lead, the Genocide Convention’s reference to “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” could well be taken to encompass rape.

\(^{168}\) International Criminal Court, Second Warrant of Arrest for Omar Hassan Ahmed Al Bashir, July 12 2010 https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2010_04825.PDF

\(^{169}\) Cassie Powell, “‘You Have No God’: An Analysis of the Prosecution of Genocidal Rape in International Criminal Law,” \textit{Richmond Public Interest Law Review} 20, no. 1 (2017): 25–47, 37. Since beginning to hear cases in 2003, the ICC has indicted twelve individuals for rape. In the other eleven cases, rape was classified, more conventionally, as a war crime or crime against humanity.
Importantly, this element of the novel also refracts readerly attention backwards, inviting us to reassess the narratives we have of the Biafran war in light of more expansive understandings of genocide. Despite all the writing about genocide in relation to the Nigeria-Biafra war, we have very few discussions of sexual violence in that context. Focusing on fictional texts, Obioma Nnaemeka suggests that this elision is a function of the fact that most of the war's novels are written by men, who tend to focus on consensual sex and "raise moral questions about the promiscuity of girls during the war." While this may be true, most of the war novels by women also downplay sexual violence, relegating it, as Marion Pape observes, to "annotations and subordinate clauses." Two important exceptions are Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, both of which give extended attention to depictions of sexual violence. These novels, however, do not portray rape as potentially genocidal, focusing instead on the way in which soldiers prey on those they are ostensibly defending.

Historically speaking, we know very little about the role of sexual violence in the Nigeria-Biafra war. There are no compelling historical studies of the subject, nor any credible estimates about its prevalence. Pro-Biafran newspapers mention sexual violence occasionally and in a very general manner. Such references generally trade in euphemism, as in this *Biafra Sun* article from July 1967 (which notably also invokes the Holocaust): "Perhaps, apart from Jewish women during the

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172 In *Destination Biafra*, Debbie is raped by fellow soldiers in the Nigerian army; in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu—a character with whom the reader has grown to empathize—rapes a Biafran bar-girl at the insistence of other Biafran soldiers. On the latter, see Zoë Norridge, “Sex as Synecdoche: Intimate Languages of Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun and Aminatta Forna’s The Memory of Love,” *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 2 (2012): 18–39, https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.43.2.18.
173 One of the few peer-reviewed articles discussing the issue as a historical phenomenon ultimately relies on Emecheta’s (fictional) *Destination Biafra* as its primary source.
Hitlerite scourge, no women, the world over, have suffered greater pains, degradation and humiliation than Biafran women at the hands of the feudal barbarians of Northern Nigeria."

A nonfiction account sympathetic to the Federal side, Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra*, confirms that sexual violence was part of at least some Biafran women’s experience of the war. This violence, however, is typically framed as wholly distinct from the question of genocide—despite the massive body of propaganda attending to the latter. Shortly after the war ended, for example, a Canadian general assessing claims of genocide noted that he had heard stories of rape from defeated Biafran civilians. However, he added, "rape is not so serious," noting that "we are here to investigate genocide."

Although the general’s tone may raise eyebrows among readers today, few would balk at the basic assumption that rape and genocide are two distinct crimes. (In most cases, they are.) Okorafor’s novel, however, sketches an alternate legal framework—inverting us to critically reassess the parameters of genocide as it was imagined in the late 1960s.

To be clear, I am not arguing that sexual violence was, in fact, used as part of a genocidal strategy by Nigerian forces; we do not know nearly enough about the prevalence and function of sexual violence in the war to assess whether this was the case. Rather, I am suggesting that Okorafor’s account of sexual violence as a mode of genocide—situated as it is within a world that is at least partially a reimagined Biafra—invites us to return to the earlier narratives of the conflict with fresh eyes, alert to their lacunae. As Reynaldo Anderson notes, Afrofuturism can function as a mode

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175 Elechi Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra: A Civil War Diary* (Heinemann, 1973), 178. Amadi, who worked for the Federal administration of Port Harcourt after its fall, is strikingly cavalier on the subject. Irritated with a woman whose distress strikes him as "out of proportion with her misfortunes," he attempts to shut down discussion of sexual violence by addressing the displaced women with this command: "Women, you have been raped; so what? All you need is hot water." While this attitude is more dismissive than most, it is representative insofar is at treats sexual violence as a problem for survivors to manage, not a threat to society at large.
of "reimagining...the past" as well as a way to envision possible futures. Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* works in both modes simultaneously: her Seven Rivers Kingdom imagines a future almost unrecognizably distant from our present Africa, yet also invites readers to critically reexamine the conflicts of the recent (and not-so-recent) past. In fact, it is the novel's very investment in speculative approaches that enables this move; by departing radically from the historical record and the strictures of realism, *Who Fears Death* creates space for readers to encounter Biafra's memory with fresh eyes, attentive to the war's silences as well as its familiar stories.

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This chapter began with the observation that Biafran wartime propaganda is littered with analogies between ongoing Nigerian violence and the Nazi attempt to exterminate Europe's Jews. These comparisons were rhetorically successful in one respect: they became a dominant paradigm for conversations about the war beyond Biafran borders. British activists adapted such language to signal the dangers of complicity, suggesting that history would judge British silence harshly:

At least most of the Germans under Hitler could plausibly say that they didn't know what was being done to the Jews, that they could not have been expected to believe it was possible. But we *do* know what is being done to the Biafrans. Such rhetoric contributed to a sense of urgency and moral authority within the activist movement, though it did not ultimately move the British government to recognize Biafran statehood. After the war, the role of Holocaust analogies shifted: since recognition was no longer on the table, postwar

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writers picked up the trope both to memorialize Biafran suffering and, in some cases, to critique the Biafran government’s complicity in that suffering. Severed from its instrumental political context, the Holocaust analogy became a more flexible trope, increasingly useful to writers with ambivalent or even antagonistic relationships to the idea of Biafra.

More recent novels of the Nigeria-Biafra war are also marked by an interest in thinking genocide comparatively, although the two texts I have discussed here do that work in quite different ways. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* represents the Holocaust analogy as part of her novel's richly detailed historical setting, framing the comparison as one thread in a set of ongoing debates among Biafra's intellectual elite. Her depiction has little of the urgency of the 1968 propaganda, filtered as it is through the eyes of a character who is less than fully engaged with the conversation at hand; this attention to Biafra's historical specificity resonates with her broader resistance to the recruitment of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a frame for understanding the then-ongoing violence in Darfur. In contrast, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* uses its speculative, futuristic setting to open up connections between disparate sites of historical trauma. Drawing on legal thinking that emerged from genocides of the 1990s, Okorafor suggests that sexual violence can be understood, in some cases, as a form of genocide—an idea with implications for the ongoing criminal case against Omar al-Bashir. However, this framework also offers an occasion to reflect back on the dearth of critical attention to sexual violence as a component of the Biafran war, and to recognize the relatively narrow way in which Biafra's propagandists conceptualized genocide.

I have alluded to the role of genre in shaping these two recent novels' openness to unexpected connections: Adichie stays grounded in the granular details of a richly textured realism, while Okorafor embraces the imaginative loops and swerves of speculative fantasy. Implicit in this discussion is the notion that individual genres have their own affordances and limitations—norms that enable writers to express some ideas more easily and more fully than others. The next chapter
engages this argument directly by examining a mode of genre fiction that has been enduringly popular for writers concerned with the nature and limits of Biafran sovereignty: the thriller.
Chapter 4: A Twisting Conspiracy

The Biafra Thriller

As Theodora Ezeigbo has observed, the postwar years were marked by the sudden flowering of a new Nigerian genre: the thriller.\(^1\) Though detective and crime novels had been published in Nigeria as early as the 1950s,\(^2\) the emergence of the thriller as a Nigerian genre is typically pegged to the 1970 publication of Adaora Lily Ulasî's Many Thing You No Understand. Over the next decade, Ulasî published four more crime thrillers, developing a reputation for "adapting the genre...to an Igbo or Yoruba context."\(^3\) Throughout the next decade, Nigerian authors including Kole Omotoso, Bode Sowande, Sola Oloyede, Kalu Okpi, and Dilibe Onyeama authored a range of new English-language thrillers. The genre also took root in Yoruba literature: Ọládèjọ́ Ọkédiàjí's Ọjọ́ ló Ọọ́rù [It is the ceiling that carries the weight] and Kọlá Akínládè's Ta L'ó Pa Ọmọ Ọba [Who killed the prince] were published in 1969 and 1971, respectively. This flurry of writing was bolstered by the emergence of new Nigerian publishing houses, many of which devoted significant resources to cultivating and publishing writers of thrillers.\(^4\) As Ezeigbo notes, the "extraordinary and pervasive experimentation with form" that marked the thriller boom resulted from an expansion of the ranks of Nigerian writers: many more people began to write and publish creative work, often riffing on popular British

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and US writers like Ian Fleming and James Hadley Chase. These writers constituted a new cohort of Nigerian literati, younger and more politically and geographically diverse than the old Ibadan elite symbolized by Achebe and Soyinka.

Many of the thrillers published during this postwar boom focused explicitly on the events of Nigeria’s recent history, which furnished ample material for a genre oriented around politics, espionage, and secretive dealings. In this chapter, I focus on three thrillers—two from the 1970s and one from 2013—that explore the role of non-state actors in authorizing or subverting Biafra’s struggle for self-determination. In their attention to mercenary and corporate power, all three of these novels prioritize sovereignty’s economic dimensions. The two earlier novels suggest that such nefarious business interests can be outwitted by clever heroes committed to Biafran ideals; the more recent one offers a darker vision of a world order entirely coopted by multinational oil companies and complacent Western powers. Read together, these novels suggest that the thriller becomes a privileged genre for narrating the failure of Biafran self-determination precisely because it is attuned to the shadowy movement of power within and beyond the formal structures of the state. In other words, the thriller provides something that the realist novel, with its focus on bearing witness to individual suffering, cannot: a framework for tracking complex flows of geopolitical power.

Defining the Thriller

The thriller is a "notoriously difficult" genre to define, writes Anne Longmuir. It brushes up against—and sometimes intersects with—a range of other genres including the crime novel, the espionage novel, and the detective story. Its thrills may emerge variously from psychological twists,

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violence, sex, suspense, or simply a fast-paced plot. In spite of this diversity, thrillers do tend toward a certain family resemblance. So before turning to the particular Biafra-focused thrillers that form the core of my argument in this chapter, it will be helpful to name the generic tropes that ground that argument.

Jerry Palmer's classic 1978 account of the thriller highlights two essential features: the hero and the conspiracy. For Palmer, the hero is a lone wolf, often an outsider, whose worldview and modus operandi is marked by "competitive individualism." Though he (and it is usually a he) may have allies or accomplices at various points, these figures prove, by the novel's end, to be either "treacherous or incompetent." At the end of the day, the hero can trust only himself. Even where the protagonist ostensibly operates within an organization or agency, he often "breaks the rules of that organisation in order to get his work done." As we shall see, the James Bond of William Boyd's Solo (2013) is a paradigmatic instance of this sort of maverick hero: though he ostensibly works for the British state, the central drama of the novel concerns Bond's risky decision to "go solo" in defiance of his official orders. Much the same might be said of the two other heroes I discuss, Colonel Chumah in Eddie Iroh's Forty-Eight Guns for the General (1976) and Cat Shannon in Frederick Forsyth's The Dogs of War (1974).

The second element that Palmer identifies as essential to the genre is a conspiracy that the hero must expose and subvert. In the thriller, the conspiracy typically names a wrong that is both more nefarious and more deeply embedded than the wrong at the heart of a crime or detective novel. Anne Longmuir terms this particular type of badness a "conspiracy of the whole," a phrase

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11 Longmuir, “Genre and Gender,” 130.
that usefully suggests the sort of profound and pervasive evil the hero must confront—often linking politicians, police, military leaders, and/or the criminal underworld.\textsuperscript{12} While the villain in a crime novel might be driven by prosaic motives such as greed or revenge, this run-of-the-mill criminality is insufficient to distinguish thriller's villain; a conspiracy of the whole must be not merely illegal but "disgustingly wrong."\textsuperscript{13} The villain of \textit{The Dogs of War} neatly encapsulates this sort of grotesque conspiracy in the novel's most famous line: "Knocking off a bank or an armored truck is merely crude. Knocking off an entire republic has, I feel, a certain style."\textsuperscript{14}

It is the wrongness of this central conspiracy that motivates the novel's plot, and its complexity that provides suspense. The thriller typically relies on tight plotting and surprising twists: the reader is hooked by the promise of a final resolution that will clarify a series of murky circumstances and puzzles. At the same time, the genre prizes a spare, straightforward prose style; indeed we might say the complexity of the thriller's plot is counterbalanced by syntax that prioritizes clarity. This stylistic simplicity, as we shall see, enacts the thriller's promise that all the murky forces animating the novel's plot will, in the end, be dragged into the daylight and straightened out.

This emphasis on the working-out and laying-bare of a complex conspiracy gives the thriller a certain temporal structure: the novel ends when the mystery has been solved and the disturbance to the social and political order defused. In its most conventional form, that is, the thriller tracks a disturbance to the social order followed by a return to the status quo ante. Thus the thriller's hero—unlike, for instance, the Byronic romantic hero—represents "the social order that already exists."\textsuperscript{15} In unveiling and disabling a threatening conspiracy, the hero protects society from dissolving into chaos and barbarism. The thriller's resolution, Palmer argues, thus symbolically "re-founds the

\textsuperscript{12} Longmuir, “Genre and Gender,” 130.
\textsuperscript{13} Palmer, \textit{Thrillers}, 16.
\textsuperscript{14} Frederick Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}. (New York: Bantam, 1975), 142.
\textsuperscript{15} Palmer, \textit{Thrillers}, 203.
state," enabling the reader to close the novel with a sigh of relief: evil has been vanquished, and order restored.\textsuperscript{16} This framing of the thriller's plot structure is especially suggestive for the novels I examine here, in which the establishment of a (Biafran) state is literally at stake. The coincidence of symbolic resolution and literal plot point is most visible in Forsyth's \textit{The Dogs of War}, in which the threatening conspiracy is foiled by the establishment of a just Biafran state. In the second novel I look at, Eddie Iroh's \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General}, the novel ends while the war is still ongoing: the Biafran state has not yet been formally founded. Yet, as I will argue, the novel's symbolic resolution—ejecting scheming mercenaries from a Biafran people's struggle—works to affirm the viability and necessity of a sovereign Biafran state.

The third novel I examine, however, ends on a more unsettled note. This is William Boyd's \textit{Solo}, a 2013 entry into the James Bond canon. \textit{Solo} hews to the typical generic structure of the thriller up to a point: Bond is a compelling individualist hero (thus the title), and he does indeed unmask a heinous conspiracy that threatens the political status quo. But in \textit{Solo}, Bond's viewpoint is aligned with the British state, and so his disruption of the conspiracy works to bolster the UK's interests rather than the interests of Dahum (Boyd's fictionalized Biafra). Yet by the novel's end, Bond has seen enough of Dahum—and of the UK's dubious interventions in the war—to have developed mixed feelings. He does his duty as a representative of the state, but the novel ends in ambivalence and bitterness: Bond's actions have helped squelch the possibility of Dahumian independence, and the world-weary hero is by no means sure that this outcome is just. The reader closes the novel with a sense of narrative but not ethical closure: the plot's twists and turns have been worked out and the status quo has been restored—yet Bond's newfound knowledge leaves us with a nagging sense of unease.

\textsuperscript{16} Palmer, \textit{Thrillers}, 85.
Jerry Palmer terms this subgenre the "negative thriller."\footnote{Palmer, \textit{Thrillers}, 41.} The negative thriller lacks the catharsis of positive thriller; the reader is left feeling that, although the hero has ostensibly achieved his goal, "the world is no better a place for it."\footnote{Palmer, \textit{Thrillers}, 50.} In Palmer's taxonomy, based on mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century thrillers from the US and UK, the negative thriller is something of an aberration. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the refusal to fully reaffirm the status quo is actually quite a common feature of thrillers. This is especially true in the postcolonial context, where the very validity of the law as a structure of justice has been subject to repeated critique. As Ranka Primorac writes, African thrillers often "self-consciously" sketch the value of social change.\footnote{Ranka Primorac, "Cosmopolitanism and Social Change in a Zambian Thriller," \textit{Research in African Literatures} 41, no. 3 (2010): 49–61, 53 \url{https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.2010.41.3.49}.} For recent instances of this trend, we might look to South Africa's Deon Meyer, Zambia's Grieve Sibale and Sekeleni Banda, Zimbabwe's Rodwell Musekiwa Machigauta, Nigeria's Tony Marinho, and even Senegal's Boubacar Boris Diop. As Christine Matzke and Susanne Muhleisen note in a recent overview of postcolonial crime fiction (including but not limited to the thriller), these novels often do not rely on a restoration of a disturbed social order, but rather on a resolution that questions the status quo via "alternative notions of justice."\footnote{Christine Matzke and Susanne Muhleisen, \textit{Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 5.} Indeed, they point out that postcolonial thrillers often dispense with the necessity of shoring up the law, instead suggesting that power and authority "can be investigated through the magnifying glass of other knowledges"—over and against the interests of national leaders and/or former colonial regimes.\footnote{Matzke and Muhleisen, \textit{Postcolonial Postmortems}, 5.} These novels thus problematize conventional accounts of how the thriller shores up the sovereign authority that it depicts as (temporarily) threatened.
Though two of the three novels I examine here are by British rather than Nigerian authors, something similar can be said for the thrillers of the Nigeria-Biafra war. This is most evident in William Boyd's *Solo*, which ultimately questions the justice of essentially the entire Westphalian state system. (Though he doesn't realize it until the very end, the conspiracy that Bond seeks to undo is a world system rigged in favor of the West.) Even in the more conventional thrillers by Forsyth and Iroh, notes of tension and ambivalence threaten to undercut the moral closure the novels promise. In other words, the thrillers this chapter explores highlight the disjuncture between accepted forms of diplomacy and the way in which state power actually operates—through dispersed corporate and mercenary actors that can be disavowed as needed. In their depiction of the ways in which the global status quo is stacked against Biafra, these novels offer a political and economic analysis of why the drive for Biafran sovereignty failed.

**From the Outside In: Biafra Thrillers of the 1970s**

The first part of this chapter explores two Biafra thrillers of the 1970s, Frederick Forsyth's *The Dogs of War* (1974) and Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976)—novels that I suggest are particularly intriguing when read together. Both Forsyth and Iroh are masters of the genre as well as Biafra partisans; their novels combine a keen understanding of the thriller's tropes with deep personal investment in the war. Forsyth was a BBC (and later freelance) reporter who spent much of the war inside Biafran territory and enjoyed close relationships with Biafran elites. In 1969 he would publish his first book, *The Biafra Story*; in 1982 he would publish a biography of his friend.

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22 Frederick Forsyth, letter to the editor, *Telegraph*, March 9, 2003, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/3588577/Forsyth-bites-back-at-John-Simpson---.html. Forsyth covered the start of the war for the BBC from July to October 1967 before losing (or as he has it, leaving) his job. He writes that the BBC informed him that "it is not our policy to cover this war"—a stance he read as an attempt to toe the British government's line by supporting Nigeria. He subsequently left his BBC post and spent much of the next two years covering Biafra as a freelancer.
former Biafran leader Emeka Ojukwu. Iroh, too, was deeply enmeshed with the Biafran state. He trained with the Biafran militia, worked as a reporter in the state War Information Bureau, and enjoyed insider access to elements of Biafran propaganda and intelligence strategy. As we shall see, both writers take advantage of this insider knowledge to craft fiction that self-consciously mimics a kind of documentary realism.

Both novels center on a small band of European mercenaries fighting on behalf of the Biafran government, a focus that might at first glance seem surprising. European mercenaries did, in fact, fight on behalf of the Biafran government—as they did on the Nigerian side—but not in such numbers that they constituted a major factor in either side's military or political calculus. Yet for both Forsyth and Iroh, the mercenaries become a way to examine outsiders' role in Biafra's bid for statehood. Are these outlaw fighters essential to the realization of Biafran independence (as Forsyth has it)—or are they simply a new face of European rapaciousness, motivated by individual greed (as Iroh has it)? Upon whom, ultimately, does the realization of Biafran sovereignty depend? In a sense, we can read the novels' deep interest in the role of mercenaries as a mode of examining, by proxy, the larger question of outsiders' diplomatic, military, and humanitarian interventions into the war.

I approach these questions via a close look at two key traits of the thriller: the "conspiracy of the whole" and the final plot twist. As noted earlier, the "conspiracy of the whole" is Anne Longmuir's term; it denotes a nefarious plot that stretches through areas the protagonist initially assumes to be distinct (e.g., the governmental and the criminal). Both The Dogs of War and Forty-Eight Guns are emblematic of the genre in that they represent state authority as deeply enmeshed with—or coopted by—the economic interests of ostensibly external actors. In The Dogs of War, (British)

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24 Fola Oyewole, “Scientists and Mercenaries,” Transition, no. 48 (1975): 59–65, https://doi.org/10.2307/2935065. Oyewole, who fought on the Biafran side, offers a critical account of what it was like to work with European mercenaries, concluding that they were ultimately "a liability."
governmental power is depicted as essentially subordinate to the machinations of the business elite—most especially the extractive industries of oil and mining, who are out for all they can get in Britain's former colonies. In *Forty-Eight Guns for the General*, the greedy outsiders are mercenaries, ostensibly fighting for Biafra but ultimately motivated by cold hard cash. Both novels thus use the central conspiracy to suggest that governmental authority is often beholden to economic or extractive interests that may not, ultimately, serve the state well.

The second trope I examine is the plot twist, which is just what it sounds like: a sudden twist at the very end of the novel, in which the reader (and in some cases the protagonist) suddenly gains new information that casts preceding events in a different light, producing a final (shocking) revelation. If, as Jerry Palmer argues, the thriller's resolution symbolically re-founds the state, then the final plot twist is the moment when that restoration crystallizes. In the two novels I consider here, those final twists have two specific effects. First, they show that Biafra, against all odds, has come out on top. Second, they reveal to the reader that the novel's protagonist has had a larger game plan all along. That is, the structure of the plot itself asserts that the world is comprehensible (and that the protagonist has accurately understood and navigated it). Since these novels feature protagonists who support Biafran independence, the structural endorsement of their ability to outwit the "conspiracy of the whole" ultimately affirms the possibility of Biafran sovereignty. In other words, the structure of the novel affirms its thematic resolution.

At the same time, the very different ways in which Forsyth and Iroh locate the mercenaries suggest rather distinct visions of what (or rather, who) make that sovereignty possible. For Forsyth, those mercenaries are a gruff but good-hearted band of brothers who truly believe in the Biafran struggle; they may be rough around the edges, but in the end they are committed to justice. Iroh's take is quite different. His mercenaries are moved only by their own greed and won't hesitate to betray Biafra to the highest bidder. Put more briskly, Forsyth's mercenaries unmask a heinous
conspiracy while Iroh's mercenaries are the conspiracy. By reading the two novels together, we can see both their shared insistence on the tight integration of political and economic power—and their very different assessments of whose power ultimately grounds Biafran sovereignty.

A Certain Style: Frederick Forsyth's The Dogs of War

The Dogs of War opens in darkness as Biafra falls. A group of mercenaries hunkers down in the "warm, wet velvet" of the West African night, waiting for a plane to whisk them away to safety.  

They had fought on contract "for the side that had lost," now, the conquering forces of the Federal government are about to overrun that side's last few square miles of territory. Also waiting in the shadows is the losing side's leader, a man only referred to as "The General." The General is an imposing African man, uniformed and with an air of command. He speaks in deep, resonant tones, with the accent of "an English public-school man." He quotes Shakespeare. Even in the darkness, he is instantly recognizable by men who have never before met him: "half the world" knows him by his bushy black beard. His success in leading an unlikely insurrection for two and a half years is attributed to his "sheer force of personality." He is, of course, Ojukwu.

Forsyth never names the General and never once uses the term "Biafra," but the opening scene is unmistakable. We are at Uli airstrip in January 1970, as the last Biafran holdouts flee into exile. The mood is heroic and somber, illuminated only by the dazzling force of the General's personality. Forsyth notes in passing that the General's enemies doubted his leadership, but quickly refutes those concerns: "few who had been there had any doubts"—a subtle reminder to the reader.

25 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 3.
26 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 3.
27 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 5.
28 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 6.
29 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 6.
that Forsyth himself had been there.\textsuperscript{30} Even in defeat, he notes, villagers had lined the muddy roads "to chant their loyalty."\textsuperscript{31} That loyalty extends even beyond the General's immediate community: within the first five pages, a South African pilot has flown into Uli, at great personal risk, to offer the General passage to Libreville. Even the mercenaries—the titular dogs of war—seem drawn to the General for reasons beyond the financial. "If there's ever any time—if you should ever need us," their leader says, "You only have to let us know. We'll all come. You only have to call."\textsuperscript{32} The General's African troops, too, remain loyal. The lieutenant Patrick notes solemnly that the General is "still the leader" and that while he lives, "we will not forget."\textsuperscript{33}

Yet one of the curious features of \textit{The Dogs of War} is that the novel itself seems to forget about the General entirely; he will not reappear until the final pages. Instead, Forsyth's focus pivots to the political intrigues of an unscrupulous British mining magnate, James Manson. Manson is the wealthy and successful head of a company that has mining interests throughout Africa, introduced to the reader as a "Knight of the British Empire" and "a born predator."\textsuperscript{34} The novel's action kicks off when Manson stumbles into a valuable piece of information: a remote mountain in the small West African state of Zangaro (a fictionalized Equatorial Guinea) contains an extraordinarily valuable platinum deposit. The Zangari government does not know that it is sitting on what Manson estimates to be ten billion dollars' worth of platinum, and Manson intends to keep it that way. He hatches an almost laughably bold plan: he will hire a band of mercenaries to overthrow the Zangari government and install a puppet regime. Through his handpicked stooge, Manson will control the platinum deposits, and the incredible wealth they promise to generate, himself.

\textsuperscript{30} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 6.
\textsuperscript{31} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 6.
\textsuperscript{32} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 11.
\textsuperscript{33} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 9.
\textsuperscript{34} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 32-33.
The novel's central conspiracy, in other words, is a corporate plot to steal West African resources. This framing of Zangaro’s enemies can be read as symptomatic of larger currents in international law and politics in the 1970s, namely, the question of what rights formerly colonized states should have vis-a-vis corporations working in their territories. This debate—part of the larger push for a New International Economic Order—focused on a set of decisions by international arbitral tribunals that addressed commercial disputes between Third World states and multinational corporations. Beginning in the 1950s, these arbitral decisions had contributed to a new transnational law of international contracts—a hybrid of public and private international law—that dramatically reshaped the relationship between so-called developing states and corporations working within their territories.\(^{35}\) Previously, these relations had been regulated by the domestic law of the state in question; they were not within the domain of international law, which traditionally recognized only states as subjects. Under the new framework of transnational law, however, contracts between states and corporations became "internationalized," effectively treated as contracts between two independent, sovereign parties.\(^{36}\) The effect, Antony Anghie concludes, was a "real reduction of the powers of the sovereign Third World state with respect to the Western corporation."\(^{37}\)

Although these shifts emerged gradually over a period of decades, 1974—the year in which *The Dogs of War* was published—was perhaps the moment when the NIEO campaign found its fullest rhetorical expression. In May of that year, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration of the Establishment of a New International Economic Order; in December, it approved the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States. The first document articulated the UN’s determination to work towards a new economic order that would "redress existing injustices;" the

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second provided a more detailed framework for structuring that transformation (including a repetition of the doctrine of Permanent Sovereignty Over Natural Resources, which affirmed a peoples' right to their own resources).\textsuperscript{38} Both documents framed the NIEO as an extension of foundational rules of international law, a "recasting of sovereign equality as a demand for an equitable share of the world's wealth."\textsuperscript{39} At its core, the push for an NIEO was an attempt to transform...the international economic system," focused in particular on reforms that would enable recently decolonized states to develop economically and to participate in the global economy on an equal footing with the "old" states.\textsuperscript{40}

Forsyth's depiction of the villainous corporation Manson Consolidated clearly draws energy from these contemporaneous debates, particularly insofar as they address the rights of Third World states to control their own natural wealth. The novel's primary plot, after all, is kicked into motion by Manson's disregard for the legitimacy of newly independent Zangaro and his willingness to go to any lengths to capture its platinum. Yet \textit{The Dogs of War} does not channel the full radical energy of the NIEO, which was premised on the idea that the existing international order was structured to benefit "old" states at the expense of "new" ones. Rather, the plot of \textit{The Dogs of War} suggests that Manson Consolidated is as much a threat to Britain as to Zangaro; by defeating his corporate nemesis, Cat Shannon saves two states whose interests are fundamentally aligned.

In fact, many of the early textual clues that Manson Consolidated is the novel's chief antagonist center on the corporation's disdain for British law rather than its machinations in West Africa. Manson himself cannot think of the British political class without deprecating its myopia, weakness, and incompetence; meeting with a government official early in the novel, Manson refers

\textsuperscript{40} Anghie, "Legal Aspects of the New International Economic Order," 145.
to the man as an "idiot" and a "fool" whom he "despised." Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 66.
42 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 33-34.
43 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 33.
44 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 43, 53.
right-hand man what is happening: the mercenaries have double-crossed Manson and are installing a rather different leader. That new leader is none other than the General whom we last saw four hundred pages earlier, quoting Shakespeare as he awaited evacuation from the ruins of Biafra.

For the reader, this twist is pleasurable on two levels. Part of its pleasure is aesthetic and comes from a sense of structural rightness: a tying up of loose ends. We learn at the novel's end that the General's sudden entry is not quite as out-of-the-blue as it sounds. As Shannon explains to Manson's lackey, Zangaro is in fact home to a large community of the General's "people," immigrants who "do most of the work and have most of the brains."45 This information comes as a surprise to Manson, but the canny reader will have noticed a number of small, telling details that delicately set up this plot twist. Although much of Forsyth's description of Zangaro has focused on the country's indigenous peoples, the Caja and the Vindu, he has also occasionally dropped in references to a third group of disenfranchised immigrants who speak another language and come "from many miles away."46 Forsyth never names these immigrants as Igbo, but he has Shannon explain that they are known as "the Jews of Africa"—an appellation that, as I discussed in Chapter 3, the Biafran leadership self-consciously cultivated before and during the war. Now, it turns out, Shannon has recruited a new army from this immigrant community and flown in the General to take the place of the deposed Kimba.

The second pleasure that this plot twist affords is ethical. Manson's greed and arrogance make him an easy-to-hate character, and the reader is delighted to see him outsmarted. But Forsyth takes care to specify that Manson's real fault is something more specific than being a corporate tycoon with a disregard for workers and democratic norms. Rather, Manson's most grievous failing takes us back to the Nigerian Civil War: Manson, we learn, had pushed the Wilson government to

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45 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 431.
46 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 137.
side with the Federal government against the Biafran secessionists. While serving on the West Africa Committee—a kind of trade union of British firms doing business in West Africa—he had urged the government to support Nigeria in the hopes that British backing would help end the war (and its trade disruptions) quickly.47 This aside passes relatively quickly amid Forsyth's sketch of the complicated relationships between business and government that structure Manson's work and the City more broadly.

Yet the ending shows it to be crucial to Shannon's motivation. In the novel's final pages, Shannon reveals his double-dealing to Manson's right-hand man, Simon Endean. Finally grasping that Shannon has foiled his boss's plan, Endean angrily asks why. Shannon answers at length:

For nearly two years, I watched between half a million and a million small kids starved to death because of people like you and Manson. It was done basically so that you and your kind could make bigger profits through a vicious and totally corrupt dictatorship, and it was done in the name of law and order, or legality and constitutional justification.48

Shannon goes on to explain that he has "worked out for [him]self" who is to blame for these outrages.49 Though politicians in both Nigeria and the UK were the most visible drivers of conflict, they were, in Shannon's view, "just a cage full of posturing apes."50 The real architects of the war were "profiteers"—businessmen like James Manson for whom control of oil, mines, and trade were more valuable than human lives.51 Punishing Manson and his ilk is Shannon's real goal, and it has a kind of poetic justice: if Biafra's bid for independence was fatally undermined by the likes of Manson, then how fitting that The Dogs of War allows Shannon to hijack a second Manson plot by

47 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 67.
48 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 432.
49 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 432.
50 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 432.
51 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 432.
refounding (literally) the state of Biafra. As the novel closes, we are informed the new regime, led by the General, is ruling Zangaro "humanely and well."\textsuperscript{52}

Two elements of this plot structure are particularly relevant to the question of sovereignty. First, \textit{The Dogs of War} suggests that the failure of Biafran independence can be laid at the feet of external corporate interests (broadly) and British extractive industries (specifically). (Fictionally, of course, we are speaking of platinum—though it's clear that Forsyth is gesturing to the role of oil companies in shaping British policy towards Nigeria during the war.) Manson's company is at the center of what, following Longmuir, I have earlier called a conspiracy of the whole—which is to say, the problem is not simply corporate interests, but the way in which those interests have, in effect, captured both particular states (Britain and Nigeria) and the international state system as a whole. At the same time, \textit{The Dogs of War} embraces the genre's conventional focus on a lone protagonist working outside the law to deliver justice—a framing that (perhaps unsurprisingly) bolsters Forsyth's own status as an outsider drawn to the romance of Biafra.\textsuperscript{53} The novel's resolution does not involve state-to-state diplomacy, UN intervention, or winning over global public opinion—any of the tactics by which Biafra historically attempted to find a place on the world stage. Instead, \textit{The Dogs of War} suggests that Biafra's future can be guaranteed through the good-hearted intervention of a plucky outsider with no patience for political or legal norms: a DIY approach to state formation.

That do-it-yourself ethos is central to the novel's form, as well as to its plot. As many readers have remarked, \textit{The Dogs of War} goes into unusual depth about how, exactly, Shannon manages to pull off this fictional coup. His preparation is detailed in the novel's long middle section, "The Hundred Days," which takes the reader through the nitty-gritty steps by which Shannon secretly acquires the men, money, and materiel to overthrow Zangaro's leader. Weapons must be

\textsuperscript{52} Forsyth, \textit{Dogs of War}, 434.
\textsuperscript{53} The novel's dedication reads: "For Giorgio, and Christian and Schlee, and Big Marc and Black Johnny, and the others in the unmarked graves. At least we tried." (n.p.)
purchased, shell companies established, money transferred, a pliable Zangari exile identified, and so forth. This section of the novel thus includes long disquisitions on topics such as why Belgian banks are better for secret money transfers than the "better-publicized" Swiss banks;\(^{54}\) the intricacies of British company law;\(^{55}\) and how to buy illegal weaponry.\(^{56}\) The level of detail given in these passages goes beyond what is necessary to create an aura of authenticity and begins to approach that of a how-to guide. Indeed, many have read it as such.

For decades, rumors have swirled that *The Dogs of War* is not only an entertaining thriller but a "documentary account" of an attempted 1973 coup in Equatorial Guinea that Forsyth himself helped organize.\(^{57}\) In 1978, a *Sunday Times* investigation alleged that Forsyth "masterminded and financed" a coup with the aim of establishing "a new homeland for the defeated Biafrans."\(^{58}\) The coup attempt was real enough—led by a group of European mercenaries, many of whom had fought in Nigeria—and there's no doubt that *The Dogs of War* reproduces its blow by blow with remarkable precision. It's less clear if Forsyth himself was involved in planning the coup, or simply used it as thrilling inspiration. He certainly knew many of the mercenaries from their shared time in Biafra, and—after the coup attempt was foiled—intervened to get its leader Alexander Gay released from a British jail.\(^{59}\) When the coup story broke in 1978, Forsyth denied all involvement. More recently, he has been coy. He has acknowledged that he conducted extensive research for the novel during the time the coup was being plotted, disguising himself as a South African arms dealer, networking with arms dealers in Prague and Hamburg, and making payments to the coup plotters (which he says were in return for information).\(^{60}\) In a 2006 interview with the writer Adam Roberts, Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 175
Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 181.
"The Real Dogs of War," 17.
he claims to have dreamed up the coup collectively with Gay and other mercenaries while blowing off steam in a bar.\(^{61}\)

Since such talk certainly contributes to Forsyth's aura—and the novel's sales—it's hard to know how seriously to take these claims. But the historical details of the attempted 1973 coup are less important for my purposes than the way in which *The Dogs of War* formally enacts this DIY approach to state establishment. One of these ways is the striking level of detail in "The Hundred Days," as discussed above. A second is the paratextual material surrounding the novel, which positions Forsyth's fiction as, just possibly, factual. The novel's jacket copy touts its status as a "true-to-life" thriller and its grounding in "stark factual detail."\(^{62}\) An unnumbered page preceding the novel's text asks, rhetorically, "Is this really a novel, or a brilliantly real and exciting recreation of fact?" This emphasis on the thriller's plausibility underscores the idea that, just possibly, this story could really have happened—a single mercenary who carefully prepares might just manage to replace a despot with a just and humane ruler. The framing page's unconventional use of the second person even invites the reader to imagine himself as that protagonist:

> You are crouching in the darkness of an African night, cradling a Schmeisser machine pistol in your arms, grenades and bazooka components heavy on your back, sweaty fingers gripping a good luck charm. The starlight flare bursts overhead—and it's time, time to unleash...THE DOGS OF WAR.\(^{63}\)

Not only does Forsyth suggest that his hero could successfully unmask a threatening conspiracy; he suggests that you, the reader, could do the same. In this way, *The Dogs of War* presents itself not only as a thrilling fiction but as a kind of handbook.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{62}\) Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, jacket text.

\(^{63}\) Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, n.p.

\(^{64}\) This tone contrasts strikingly to, for instance, the James Bond novel *Solo*, discussed later in this chapter. Perhaps because *Solo* is a 21st century addition to the Bond drama, it self-consciously flaunts its escapism—reveling in descriptions of luxurious food, drink, clothing, and cars. *Solo* skips over the boring middle and serves the reader a steady stream of exciting twists and turns—a choice that throws into relief Forsyth's matter-of-fact insistence on nailing all the details.
Here, the novel's afterlife is telling: for not only are the origins of *The Dogs of War* entangled with the 1973 coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea, the novel is also widely read as the template for a separate 2004 coup plot, also in Equatorial Guinea.\(^{65}\) The British leader of the 2004 plot also portrayed himself as following in the path laid out by *The Dogs of War*, titling his own autobiography *Cry Havoc*. The association was picked up in the press, as well; in covering the juicy story, newspaper after newspaper invoked Forsyth's thriller.\(^ {66}\) In fact, the definitive account of the 2004 coup attempt—Adam Roberts' 2007 *The Wonga Coup*—begins by echoing the opening of *The Dogs of War*. Here is Roberts:

> There were no stars that night on the Harare airstrip, nor any moon; just the southern African darkness wrapping around him like warm, wet velvet...\(^ {67}\)

And Forsyth:

> There were no stars that night on the bush airstrip, nor any moon; just the West African darkness wrapping round the scattered groups like warm, wet velvet.\(^ {68}\)

To what extent the 2004 plotters used Forsyth's text as a guide is, of course, difficult to ascertain—but as this echo makes clear, Roberts certainly used Forsyth's text as a basis for his own telling of the more recent history. In short, *The Dogs of War* has become a kind of cultural

\(^{65}\) The 2004 coup plan was foiled when Zimbabwean police arrested ringleader Simon Mann in Harare; Mann subsequently served time in both Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea before receiving a pardon from President Theodoro Obiang, whom he had sought to overthrow.


\(^{67}\) Roberts, *The Wonga Coup*, xiii.

\(^{68}\) Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 3.
touchstone, an ur-text through which the actions of subsequent mercenaries and private military contractors can be read and interpreted.

I emphasize the novel's cultural afterlife for two reasons. First, I have been suggesting that a key trait of *The Dogs of War* has been its powerful commitment to an individualistic hero who almost singlehandedly reshapes the political landscape of West Africa. The way in which *The Dogs of War* positions itself as a kind of how-to manual invites the reader to imagine himself as the novel's hero—an imaginative move that is literalized in mercenary Nick du Toit's claim that the 2004 coup attempt was, in fact, based on *The Dogs of War*.

Second, the cultural significance of this novel highlights the importance of genre fiction as a point of contact between the strictly literary and the wider world. When a popular novel becomes a template for journalistic accounts of contemporary politics, it's worth asking how that novel might shape public perceptions of the events it is used to frame. (It's hard to imagine, for instance, that the frequent journalistic comparisons to a basically heroic band of mercenaries didn't positively shade newspaper readers' understanding of Simon Mann, Nick du Toit, and the other 2004 conspirators. At the very least, such an analogy frames their coup attempt as an entertaining caper.) One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that, as literary critics, we need to take seriously the mutually reinforcing linkages among literary, journalistic, and legal texts. *The Dogs of War* makes those crosscurrents unusually visible.

What, then, is the vision of sovereignty that animates this influential novel? Most significantly, realizing Biafran sovereignty seems to consist here simply of installing the General in office; there's no suggestion that he has any more political legitimacy in Zangaro than his ill-fated predecessor. It's not clear, for instance, how the indigenous Caja and Vindu might take to a new

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69 Tracy McVeigh, Rajiv Syal, and Patrick Smith, "Simon Mann, freed dog of war, is demanding justice" *Guardian* November 7 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/nov/08/simon-mann-mark-thatcher-wonga-coup. Documentary filmmaker James Brabazon claims that du Toit described the planned coup as follows: "It's not like the plot of a book, it is one, Frederick Forsyth's *Dogs of War*. You should read it."
Igbo-led government; nor does the novel treat this as a relevant issue to consider. The question of international recognition is never even raised, nor is the fact that this new regime is taking control of a territory hundreds of miles away from Igboland; one is left with the sense that "Biafra" inheres in the General's person. It's worth noting, too, how the characterization of the General as "an English public-school man" with a fondness for Shakespeare differentiates him from, for instance, the "corrupt, vicious, [and] brutal" Zangari dictator Kimba—and indeed, from the generally foolish Africans who play bit parts throughout the novel. Forsyth never uses the word "civilized," but the strong implication is that the General is in sync with the oldest and highest strains of English culture.

In positioning a corporation at the heart of its conspiracy, furthermore, the novel registers a contemporary push to recognize economic questions as an essential component of sovereign equality. This broader environment is, I think, a key part of the anxiety that The Dogs of War manifests: the sense, pervasive in the novel, that real power inheres not in the state but in the corporations that have captured both its natural resources and its political processes. In The Biafra Story (1969), Forsyth had written of the powerful role that business interests—particularly Shell-BP—played in pressing the British government to support Nigeria. Forsyth's novel, in line with the other thrillers I explore in this chapter, begins to imagine an alternative: what would it take to create a world in which a state like Biafra could exist outside of the grasp of corporations whose primary goal must always be "to exploit, trade, and make a profit"?

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70 And indeed, Forsyth's total focus on the Igbo figures Biafra as an ethnostate, giving credence to the widespread suspicion that the former Eastern Region's minorities were included within its boundaries primarily for their oil reserves.
71 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 78.
73 Forsyth, The Biafra Story, 168.
The Dogs of War answers this question with its plucky band of mercenary heroes. The novel thus leaves the reader with the unnerving implication that Biafran sovereignty emerges not through conventional state channels (i.e., diplomatic recognition) but through the military intervention of a gang of European mercenaries. In one of the novel's most interesting moments, Forsyth himself acknowledges just how unsettling his resolution is. As Shannon's plot to undermine Manson finally becomes visible to the reader in the novel's final pages, the mercenary leader emphasizes his uncomfortable similarity to his arch-nemesis. "We are both mercenaries," Shannon coolly observes to one of Manson's men, "along with Sir James Manson and most of the people who have power in the world."74 (The earlier description of Manson as a "pirate" also links the businessman to the mercenary.) So though Forsyth establishes in no uncertain terms that Shannon and his dogs of war are the novel's heroes, the thriller's pat resolution conceals an unnerving implication: that the power of refounding the Biafran state rests not with the General or the Igbo people (whether in Nigeria or Zangaro), but with the European mercenaries who just so happen to align themselves with Biafra. The result is a literal as well as a symbolic refounding of the Biafran state, bringing to fruition the vague intimations of the novel's opening.

A People's War? Eddie Iroh's Forty-Eight Guns for the General

The unnerving subtext of The Dogs of War becomes the main text of Eddie Iroh's Forty-Eight Guns for the General (1976), which positions itself as a sharp rejoinder to Forsyth's faith in good-hearted hired guns. Like the earlier novel, Forty-Eight Guns is a classic thriller centered on the machinations of a group of European mercenaries fighting (ostensibly) on behalf of Biafra. But whereas Forsyth's novel is set after the fall of Biafra, Iroh's opens in the early days of the war—with

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74 Forsyth, Dogs of War, 430.
the mercenaries’ arrival at Uli airstrip in the dark of the night, rather than with their departure (as Forsyth has it). A second key difference is the character of the mercenaries: while Forsyth’s cold-blooded killers turn out to be surprisingly warm and fuzzy, Iroh’s are motivated solely by the potential for financial gain. For them, war is a business. By depicting the mercenaries as the thriller’s antagonists rather than their protagonists, Forty-Eight Guns is an attempt to shut down the Dogs of War’s destabilizing suggestion that Biafran sovereignty is only imaginable when founded on the military might of hired guns. Forty-Eight Guns, in contrast, invites readers to identify the mercenaries as a foreign element, and then to feel the narrative satisfaction of seeing a Biafran protagonist successfully expel them from the nation.

Like The Dogs of War, Forty-Eight Guns for the General opens in the tropical darkness of Uli airstrip. As in Forsyth’s novel, a group of European mercenaries—veterans of the Congo and Algeria—smoke and chat quietly in the shadows. But in Iroh’s novel, we are still at the start of the war: it is October 1967 and the mercenaries—the titular "forty-eight guns"—are hired by the Biafran state to help turn the war’s tide after the fall of Enugu. From the very start, Iroh emphasizes that this arrangement works for the Biafrans only in the sense that they have few other options: the mercenary who organizes the deal notes "his opponent’s desperation and his own monopoly power" and presses for very favorable terms indeed.75 The use of the term "monopoly" nudges the reader to recognize, at the very start of the novel, that the mercenaries are businessmen—something that The Dogs of War acknowledges only obliquely, in its final pages. What's more, Biafra's position outside of the recognized international community means that it is always negotiating at a disadvantage. In describing the mercenaries' negotiation with Biafra's leader ("the General"), Iroh initially frames it as an accord between "two eminent chiefs," suggesting a relative equality of position. But in the very next sentence, he undercuts that analogy dramatically: "except that the details of the accord were not

so much worked out as dictated by the white party."\textsuperscript{76} Whereas Forsyth's novel opens with the mercenaries' heartfelt pledge of allegiance to the General—even in defeat—Iroh's makes quite clear that his mercenaries "owed no loyalties or allegiance to anyone."\textsuperscript{77} They are wholly self-interested, motivated by money and a thirst for adventure.

What's more, they have wormed their way into the very heart of the Biafran state: they are there at the request of "the General"—Biafra's commander-in-chief and political leader, a stand-in for Ojukwu.\textsuperscript{78} It is the General who has brought the mercenaries in—not because he fully trusts them but because he sees no other options.\textsuperscript{79} Throughout the novel, the General accedes to essentially all of the mercenaries' demands—allowing their leader total authority to command not only the other mercenaries but an independent division of the Biafran army.\textsuperscript{80} (As Iroh notes sardonically, the mercenary leader is promoted to a colonel in the "Biafran People's Army" well before he ever sets foot on Biafran soil.\textsuperscript{81}) In other words, Iroh represents the threatening conspiracy as one that has already partially infiltrated the Biafran state; even its leader has been hoodwinked.

This depiction of The General offers a sharp counterpoint to the way in which Forsyth imagines the relationship between the Biafran state and its leader. The Dogs of War essentially treats the General as the incarnation of the Biafran body politic; simply installing him in power is, for Forsyth, enough to establish Biafra as a legitimate state. For Iroh, though, the General is a well-meaning but fallible leader—tasked with protecting the Biafran people, who are the true instantiation of Biafra. Clearly, his simple presence at the top of the chain of command is not enough to safeguard the nation's future.

\textsuperscript{76} Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 43.
\textsuperscript{77} Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 40.
\textsuperscript{78} Like Forsyth, Iroh only ever refers to Biafra's leader as "The General."
\textsuperscript{79} Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 43.
\textsuperscript{80} Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 55.
\textsuperscript{81} Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 44.
The figure who is able to safeguard that future is the novel's hero, Charles Chumah. Chumah alone consistently articulates a (well-founded) skepticism about the mercenaries' motives, committed as he is to the idea that Biafra is its people and a Biafran state can only come into being through a "people's struggle."\textsuperscript{82} Chumah is, not incidentally, also a colonel in the Biafran People's Army, and it is through his perspective that Iroh articulates an alternative vision of how a Biafran state might come to be: through a military struggle led by its people. This vision is articulated especially strongly in an opening sequence in which Chumah leads his men to an astonishing defense of the capital city, Enugu. Though Enugu seems certain to fall, Chumah rallies the troops with an inspiring speech premised on the claim that all Biafran soldiers, no matter their rank, are "equals, brave and gallant equals," sharing the unhappy commonality of being besieged: "all our lives are threatened," he cries, "yours, mine, and your families."\textsuperscript{83} He promises that he will join the fight with his own machine gun and fight "with...not behind" his troops.\textsuperscript{84} Here, the army is a remarkably egalitarian institution, one that effectively channels the Biafran people's desire for freedom. In this sense, both Chumah in particular and the army more broadly function in the novel as foils for the mercenaries. So when the General brings on the mercenaries over Chumah's objections, the latter nonetheless insists that he is unwilling to fight alongside those "who are making money at the expense of the lives of the people who are contributing the money."\textsuperscript{85} After all, he reasons, the mercenaries will earn pay for as long as they are fighting and thus will have no incentive to win the war and bring their own employment to an end.

In choosing to challenge his commanding officer, Chumah breaks with the army and commits to resisting the mercenaries on his own. At this point, we begin to see the individualistic

\textsuperscript{82} Iroh, \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General}, 30.
\textsuperscript{84} Iroh, \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General}, 14.
\textsuperscript{85} Iroh, \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General}, 110.
ethos so central to the genre of the thriller emerging: only when Chumah breaks free of the bureaucracy around him (and the Biafran people) is he is able to effectively advance Biafra's interests. Yet in this novel, the focus on Chumah's solo maneuvering—which occupies the vast majority of its pages—sits awkwardly with Iroh's insistence on the centrality of a people's struggle. To what extent, if at all, can the thriller take as its subject a people's struggle? On the one hand, the novel's final plot twist offers a neat way to square that circle, dependent as it is on both the people's ingenuity and Chumah's solo mission. At the same time, I'll argue, several aspects of the novel's language seem to resist that synthesis—suggesting that the tension between solo hero and people's struggle is not so easily resolved.

First, the novel's closing. In the end, predictably, the mercenaries revolt. They disobey the General's orders to retake Onitsha and instead capture Uli airstrip—Biafra's one, increasingly vital link to the outside world—demanding two million dollars and safe passage back to Europe. The General is enraged; Chumah is vindicated. The final scene unfolds at the airstrip, as Chumah—finally back in the General's good graces—attempts to outwit the mercenaries. He does so, effectively recapturing the allegiance of the Biafran soldiers whom the mercenaries had commanded. By the novel's close, his unconventional rogue action is ratified by the General's recognition that the mercenaries are, in fact, a "miserable band of money-seeking gangsters," out for blackmail and extortion.86 Yet in a gesture of magnanimity, the General allows the defeated mercenaries to commandeer an unused plane and fly back to Europe.

But then comes the plot twist—in this case, on the very last page. The whole drama seems to have been resolved with the mercenaries' escape, albeit without the two million dollars they had sought to extort. Then Iroh allows us to overhear a brief exchange between Chumah and his second-in-command, who wonders if letting the mercenaries go without a minder might not be

86 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 185.
following the General's command "to a ridiculous extent"? Chumah calmly informs him that there is a very good reason not to have sent along a minder: the plane's luggage compartment is packed full with "200 pounds of Biafra-made ogbunigwe chain-mines," wired to explode and bring down the plane in precisely two hours. As he notes sardonically to his second-in-command, "the General can't court-martial us for accidental explosions over the high seas, can he?" As with the final plot twist in The Dogs of War, the sudden reveal of new information has two key effects. First, it provides a satisfying moral closure to the novel: the mercenaries aren't getting away with their selfish scheme, after all. And second, it reaffirms the reader's trust in our protagonist, Chumah. In the course of the novel, Chumah has steadfastly opposed the mercenaries and insisted that Biafra must be established through the will and commitment of the Biafran people. Fittingly, Iroh's reference to the ogbunigwe literalizes this theme: these explosives were not only manufactured in Biafra, but developed and prototyped by Biafra's famous Research and Production (RAP) unit. Weapons (such as the ogbunigwe) developed by the RAP were, historically, quite effective against Nigerian forces—though the lack of materials meant that they could never be produced in quantities sufficient to permanently affect the tide of war. They were even more effective, however, as a morale booster: a concretization of the claim, central to the Biafran information strategy, that the scrappy underdogs could defeat their well-funded opponents through indigenous brainpower, innovation, and creativity. By killing off the mercenaries with ogbunigwe, Iroh gives a final tip of the hat to Chumah's contention that a "people's struggle" driven by "determination" will always defeat an opponent motivated solely by greed.

87 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 218.
88 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 218.
89 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 218.
91 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 30.
Yet this is just one moment, though a significant one. At other points throughout the novel, Iroh's use of language complicates this attempt to resolve the tension between solo actor and people's struggle. One instance is the novel's use of military shorthand to introduce key information and to advance the plot. Throughout the novel, Iroh reproduces various military "communiques"—some of which ostensibly reproduce official communications within the Biafran Army, and others of which reproduce Chumah's secret maneuverings to defeat the mercenaries. These communiques appear in all caps and thus stand out from the main body of the text. They are often quite difficult for the lay reader to immediately understand, containing as they do instructions such as "LATEST INTREP SAYS EXPECTED EN BID NOW APPROX 55 HRS RPT 55 HRS BACKWARDS TO TEN PM TWICE." Iroh provides a glossary at the start of the novel that allows the reader to decode such messages, but not all of the terms used are in fact included in the glossary. More to the point, the reader quickly learns that it's not actually necessary to decode the messages; the main body of the novel's text gives adequate context to follow the plot. So after laboring over the first few military communiques, the reader (or at least, this reader) is apt to let these chunks of all caps slide by—treating them as aesthetic choices that evoke a mood and institutional setting rather than as crucial modes of advancing the plot.

Iroh's writerly choices thus offer the reader a very different experience than, for instance, the do-it-yourself mentality instantiated by Forsyth's incredibly detailed writing. In Forty-Eight Guns, the irruption of these blocks of capital letters into the main body of the text is disorienting. To the non-military reader, they communicate: this is not your world. Rather than inculcating a sense that the hero's plans are essentially understandable and replicable, the use of military jargon soothes the reader into simply going along with the plot—whether or not we precisely follow all of its details. The use of military jargon distances the reader from Chumah, suggesting as it does that an act of translation is

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92 Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns for the General, 159.
necessary to fully follow his maneuverings. From this perspective, the glossary serves an almost ethnographic purpose, though the difference between Chumah and the reader is not (necessarily) national or cultural, but institutional: he is a creature of the army, and the reader, presumably, is not. Thus the novel develops a sense of respect based on distance: his exploits are exciting precisely because they remain mysterious. This distancing effect, in turn, undercuts Chumah's repeated insistence that Biafra's fight is a "people's war." For if the hero's crucial communiques are written in language that most readers struggle to follow, how can the reader fully imagine himself as part of the hero's project?

There is a second, even subtler way that *Forty-Eight Guns* undercuts the notion of a people's war, and it too is linguistic. A key plot point turns on Biafra's internal ethnic diversity: a soldier who needs to send crucial information to Chumah is able to transmit that information safely only because a third party, who will overhear the conversation, does not understand the language in which the two men are speaking. The unwelcome third party is an "Efik from Calabar" who "doesn't understand one word of Igbo." In the world of the novel, this is a lucky chance that enables Chumah's allies to send him crucial information without alerting other parts of the army hierarchy. But considered more broadly, this is one of the relatively rare moments when an Igbo-authored novel directly acknowledges the ethnic diversity within the territory claimed as Biafra. That choice is particularly significant in a novel like *Forty-Eight Guns*, which so insistently returns to the notion that Biafra is a people's struggle—for acknowledging Biafra's internal diversity means acknowledging that "the people" is by no means a clear or stable category.94

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the role of ethnicity in the would-be Biafran state was a vexed question. Though the Biafran state attempted to make the case that the

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94 Though this oversimplification is characteristic of the thrillers treated here: as we have seen, *The Dogs of War* explicitly identifies Biafra as the homeland of one particular group.
new states would be ethnically inclusive, many non-Igbo Easterners never felt fully connected to Biafra as a concept or cause.\footnote{Arua Oko Omaka, "The Forgotten Victims: Ethnic Minorities in the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970," \textit{Journal of Retracing Africa} 1, no. 1 (2014): 25-40, 29, https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol1/iss1/2. Indeed, the fear of Igbo domination was a major political factor in Eastern politics before the war, motivating the "COR" push to create three new states—Calabar, Ogoja, and Rivers—that would map onto non-Igbo areas and thus allow those communities much greater state-level representation. This political push preceded Independence and received sustained attention from the 1957 Minorities Commission, but the states were not in fact created until imminent Biafran secession forced Gowon’s hand in May 1967. In creating these states, John Stremlau notes, the Federal government "established first claim to the loyalties" of millions of non-Igbo within Biafra. See Stremlau, \textit{The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970}, 55.} At stake was not only the shape of Biafran identity, but also pressing economic concerns: nearly all of the oil to which Biafra laid claim was located in these "minority" areas, south of Igboland proper.\footnote{Chibuike Uche, “Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War,” \textit{The Journal of African History} 49, no. 1 (2008): 111–35. The exception is SAFRAP’s fields in the former East Central State.} This issue was never resolved in the context of Biafra, in part because the Biafran government quickly lost military control of most non-Igbo areas (and thus most oil-rich areas). So the fact that the success of Chumah’s mission to save Biafra, in \textit{Forty-Eight Guns}, depends on two Igbo speakers deceiving a Efik speaker raises questions about the actual breadth and inclusivity of Biafran identity. Perhaps unintentionally, Iroh invokes the fear of many non-Igbo ambivalent about the promise of Biafra: that "Biafran" was only ever another word for "Igbo."

In both of these instances—the use of military shorthand and the priority given to Igbo—language delineates insiders from outsiders, those who belong from those who do not. These features of \textit{Forty-Eight Guns} thus complicate a novel that, on the surface, \textit{wants} to celebrate the war as a people's struggle. Ultimately, my reading of Iroh’s thriller highlights its ambivalence. Most obviously, \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General} accounts for the failure of Biafran independence by attributing that failure to the nefarious intervention of outsiders; it also imagines that this failure could have been averted through a dedicated people's struggle. Yet in attempting to envision how it might have been otherwise, \textit{Forty-Eight Guns} isn't quite able to thread the needle of both its ideological commitment to "a people's war" and the thriller’s generic commitment to a deeply
individualistic hero. The plot device of the *ogbunigwe* attempts to reconcile these pulls by offering a way in which the solo hero draws on the people’s ingenuity in order to outwit the mercenaries. Yet at the same time, I’ve suggested, the way in which Iroh presents the multiple languages spoken within Biafra raises questions about the role of non-Igbo citizens in the Biafran state. In doing so, the novel inadvertently highlights one of Biafra’s great weaknesses: its inability to project a convincing account of a united Biafran people.

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I began my discussion of *The Dogs of War* and *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* by framing the latter as a critique of the former, so let me close by returning to the relationship between the two. Forsyth’s *The Dogs of War* envisions the saving of Biafra via a mercenary coup that crowns Biafra’s once-and-future leader, the General. Because the General is such a minor character in the novel, however, his qualifications for leadership seem to consist of the mercenaries’ approbation and a veneer of English cultural authority (the public school accent, the fondness for Shakespeare). So though the novel concludes with the founding of a Biafran state and the assurance that the new regime will rule “humanely and well,” *The Dogs of War* ultimately suggests that Biafran sovereignty rests on the shoulders of hired guns. Yet the novel’s only acknowledgement of this unsettling worldview is the brief, final suggestion that its mercenary heroes might not, in the end, be terribly different from the rapacious corporate tycoon they seek to subvert. As I have argued here, Eddie Iroh’s *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* responds to Forsyth’s novel by writing a thriller that makes that insight central. For Iroh, Biafran sovereignty resides not in the General—a man shown to be fallible—but in the shared struggle of a people facing an existential threat.

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97 Forsyth, *Dogs of War*, 434.
Yet at a larger level, *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* and *The Dogs of War* have a great deal in common. Fundamentally, both novels take an essentially diagnostic approach to what the writers see as the tragedy of Biafra’s failure—locating that failure in a conspiracy of outsiders. For both writers, European (and particularly British) greed is at the heart of that conspiracy (whether in the form of rapacious extractive industries or self-interested mercenaries). The notion at the core here is that there’s nothing really wrong with Biafra itself—it’s simply been a victim of nefarious external (largely economic) forces. And despite the embedded critique of European intervention, both novels ultimately affirm their protagonists’ capacity to unravel evildoers’ plots and shore up the integrity of the Biafran state. In this sense, both *Forty-Eight Guns* and *The Dogs of War* share a certain idealism: they imagine what might have happened if foreign interests (whether extractive or mercenary) had been more adroitly managed by those with Biafra's best interests at heart. From this perspective, part of these novels' project is to keep alive the sense of opportunity that Biafra offered to its architects and supporters: the promise of a new birth of postcolonial possibility, a future of true self-determination that Nigeria, gripped by corruption and neocolonialism, could not offer.98 As in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*—and in many of Ojukwu's speeches—Biafra is here figured as the culmination of the independence that Nigerians imagined, but never quite experienced, after formal decolonization. As Jennifer Wenzel has written about another African context, these novels "refus[e] to forget what has never been."99 From the vantage point of the mid-1970s, the recent past becomes the raw material with which to imagine a more just future.

In both cases, however, those visions remain slightly clouded. In *The Dogs of War*, the lingering tension is that unresolved suggestion that the good-hearted mercenaries are not so different from their wily antagonist. In *Forty-Eight Guns for the General*, the lingering tension is the

conflict between the novel’s generic commitment to a profoundly individualistic hero and its ideological commitment to frame the conflict as a people’s war. As I have suggested, the very notion of a people’s struggle raises deep questions about how to define a people—questions that intersect with and echo literary and political debates over genocide discussed in the preceding chapter. Iroh’s novel does not engage with these questions, an elision that suggests that his imagined community prioritizes Igbo identity. If, as Eleni Coundouriotis argues, the African war novel typically narrates conflict as a people’s struggle, then perhaps we can identify the tensions internal to *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* as fundamentally tensions of genre: the thriller meets the war novel, and each pulls the narrative in a slightly different direction. These internal tensions can orient us towards both what sorts of insights the thriller can offer—a view of complex geopolitical power flows, a tendency towards paranoid reading—and where the genre’s drive towards closure can pre-empt a full engagement with the powerful antagonists it depicts. In this chapter’s final section, I turn to a much more recent Biafra thriller to explore what happens when an author resists that generic drive towards narrative closure.

**Going Solo**

The final novel that this chapter considers is William Boyd’s 2013 James Bond thriller, *Solo*. Written several decades after both *The Dogs of War* and *Forty-Eight Guns for the General*, it initially seems to map familiar terrain: a lightly fictionalized recounting of the Nigeria-Biafra war marked by close attention to the role of outsiders; a starkly individualistic hero; a murky conspiracy in which extractive industries play a key role. Like the earlier novels discussed, its author has personal ties to Nigeria—though, unlike Iroh and Forsyth, Boyd did not witness the war firsthand. Yet *Solo*

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100 Boyd was born in Gold Coast (now Ghana) to Scottish parents and spent his childhood in Ghana and Nigeria; his father worked at the University of Ibadan.
ultimately becomes a very different sort of thriller than either *The Dogs of War* or *Forty-Eight Guns*—for in the end, our hero fails. The novel's resolution is deeply ambivalent, highlighting the limits of Bond's capacity to shape the world to his desires. For although the novel closes with the war's end—restoring the status quo ante in just the way that Bond's superiors had hoped—the reader (and Bond himself) is given ample reason to doubt the justice of this arrangement. In other words, *Solo* is what Jerry Palmer would term a negative thriller: a novel in which the promised resolution is haunted by a sense of pervasive malaise.

Like *The Dogs of War*, *Solo* approaches the war's history coyly, through a transparent fictionality. Nigeria is represented here as the former British colony of Zanzarim (a nod to Forsyth's Zangaro); Biafra becomes the oil-rich breakaway region of Dahum. The year is 1967, and the British government is troubled by the war—ostensibly by the threat it poses to regional stability, though subsequent events will make clear that British access to oil is a more fundamental interest. As in Ian Fleming's oeuvre, James Bond is a loyal (if officially nonexistent) servant of the state. Here, he is sent into Zanzarim by his boss M on behalf of British intelligence. His mission is to end the civil war by assassinating Solomon Adeka, the brilliant military commander to whom (M believes) Dahum owes its unexpected military success. Without Adeka, M explains, the Dahumian resistance will quickly collapse in the face of Zanzarim's overwhelming military superiority.

Though the novel never mentions Nigeria or Biafra directly, Boyd references Nigeria's history on nearly every page. In the course of his sojourn through Dahum, Bond encounters just about every trope of the conflict. A small but plucky would-be country facing overwhelming odds, maneuvering through information as much as through battlefield movements. A sense that French recognition might just be the essential tipping point—if only the French would give it. White mercenaries out for all they can get. An iconic flag depicting the rising sun. A brilliant military commander nicknamed the "Scorpion" (Adeka, whose name echoes that of Benjamin Adekunle,
Nigeria’s "Black Scorpion"). A Zanzari commander-in-chief whose name, Basanjo, echoes Nigerian commander (and later president) Olusegun Obasanjo. A mysterious wealthy European who commandeers Swedish planes for a makeshift air force (a fictionalized Count Von Rosen). A federal naval blockade of the secessionist province. Supplies reaching the shrinking enclave via a humanitarian airlift centered on one essential airstrip. The iconic starving children, "skeletal as ancient wizened [men]." And within it all, occasional glimpses of British military equipment and advisors assisting federal forces, working towards murky aims of their own.

Much of the pleasure of the novel emerges from the work of piecing together what, really, is happening in Zanzarim. As in The Dogs of War and Forty-Eight Guns for the General, the reader has a partial view, full of misdirection, red herrings, and plot twists. Yet while those earlier novels set up a conspiracy that the hero foils in a final plot twist, Solo reverses that basic temporal structure. Here, it is only in the novel's final pages that Bond (and the reader) fully comprehends the conspiracy he is up against: a tangle of UK and US oil interests that have been steadily working to defeat Dahum's bid for independence. Indeed, Bond's dawning awareness of these layered conspiracies is the final plot twist; rather than closing the novel by allowing his protagonist to deftly turn the tables, Boyd ends in a minor key, underscoring how that protagonist has himself been outmaneuvered.

Boyd doesn't even allow his hero the dignity of unravelling the conspiracy that outwits him. Rather, Bond comes to understand the events he's witnessed only through a conversation with an old CIA friend, who fills in substantial gaps in 007's understanding. At the core of the events he's witnessed, Bond learns, is a commodity that he hasn't once considered: oil. In the heart of the Zanza River Delta, the CIA agent explains, is a "gigantic ocean of oil," untapped and unexplored. In the course of the conversation, Bond learns of a two-fold conspiracy—only parts of which he

had glimpsed. Oil is central to both. The first involves an illegal oil-for-arms deal between Dahum's leader and an eccentric Swede (whom Bond took for a humanitarian). The second, much larger conspiracy involves the US and UK governments and most of the world's leading oil companies.\textsuperscript{103} For this group, Dahum's bid for independence is an inconvenient complication to the oil companies' arrangements with the national Zanzari government.\textsuperscript{104} Thus they connive together both to defeat Dahum's bid for independence and to assassinate the Swedish arms dealer, rending moot his claim to Dahum's oil. All along, Bond has thought he was "going solo"—ditching his official duties in favor of a personal vendetta against an enemy who wronged him early in the novel. Here, at the novel's end, he recognizes finally that the British state was always one step ahead: rather than a rogue agent, he has been just one more cog in the wheels of a powerful state. Sometimes, he admits, "the sheer candid ruthlessness of absolute power did shake you up."\textsuperscript{105}

This final twist comes as a shock to the reader, too, since Boyd has consistently stayed extremely close to Bond's perspective. This is a striking contrast to \textit{The Dogs of War} and \textit{Forty-Eight Guns for the General}, both of which move among the perspectives of the hero, his allies, multiple antagonists, and bystanders. By allowing the reader to examine characters' actions and motives from multiple angles, these earlier novels offer the reader a nearly omniscient perspective. In \textit{Forty-Eight Guns}, for instance, the reader learns the mercenaries' true intentions early on (well before the General, for instance, recognizes what he's up against). In \textit{The Dogs of War}, the reader learns of Mason's machinations before Shannon does—but we then watch as Shannon discovers the plot, knowing that Mason himself still believes Shannon to be in the dark. In other words, these thrillers

\textsuperscript{103} I have to speculate that Boyd's decision to position oil companies as the novel's antagonist was shaped by his friendship with Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose environmental activism was discussed in the preceding chapter. The two met in 1986 and remained friends until Saro-Wiwa's 1995 execution; Boyd was a major organizer in the unsuccessful effort to get Saro-Wiwa released from jail. Boyd's \textit{New Yorker} essay "Death of a Writer" was subsequently used as the introduction to Saro-Wiwa's posthumous detention diary, \textit{A Month and a Day} (New York: Penguin, 1995).

\textsuperscript{104} In the world of the novel, these Zanzari oil fields could provide 40% of all US and UK oil needs, allowing both countries to extract themselves from the Persian Gulf.

\textsuperscript{105} Boyd, \textit{Solo}, 309.
position the reader as a privileged spectator: not privy to all information (otherwise there would be no suspense), but able to see more than most of the novel's characters. Most importantly of all, the antagonists' plotting is always visible to the reader; suspense emerges from the question of how and when the heroic protagonists will understand and outflank them. Positioning the reader in this way enlists the reader on the side of exposure and visibility, suggesting that even the most vexing conspiracies will, in the end, be clarified.

_Solo_ offers none of this reassurance. The novel stays solely focalized through Bond, so that the reader knows what Bond knows, and misses what Bond misses. And what Bond misses turns out to be quite a lot. He is fooled—twice—by a triple-crossing CIA agent. He mistakenly believes that the man he has been assigned to kill, Solomon Adeka, is already dead. On the other hand, he fails to notice the murder of Solomon's brother Gabriel. He totally fails to apprehend what the US and British governments are doing in Zanzarim. And when he finally confronts his antagonist, the nasty Rhodesian mercenary Kobus Breed, Breed manages to escape. By the novel's end, Breed has killed one of Bond's lovers and threatened another—and he is still hunting Bond. For all his style and derring-do, Boyd's Bond is curiously ineffective at understanding, or navigating, the larger geopolitical context of his mission. In short, the James Bond we see in _Solo_ operates as if in Forsyth's or Iroh's world—skeptical of his bosses and willing to go rogue in service of his own goals. What he fails to recognize is that the state he attempts to evade is not the sclerotic bureaucracy of the earlier novels, but a far more flexible and diffuse set of power structures. British sovereignty in _Solo_ is neither instantiated solely in the organs of the state, nor neatly linked to territory; it moves as deftly through ostensibly non-state actors (private military contractors and business interests) as through official legal, political, and military channels. It is diffuse, tentacular, and Bond is never able to get wholly outside of it. By the novel's close, we come to read the title _Solo_ as an ironic comment on the writer's part—Bond _thinks_ he's gone solo, but his every action has been
carefully orchestrated from above. In effect, Boyd depicts his hero as something of an anachronism: a man who operates by a set of generic rules that, the novel demonstrates, do not in fact structure the world through which he moves.106

This vision of a powerful yet supple state marks the distance between Solo and both The Dogs of War and Forty-Eight Guns for the General. In particular, Solo subverts Forsyth's distinction between capitalist and state control—suggesting instead that the interests of transnational oil companies and the interests of the UK government have become intertwined and self-reinforcing. At the same time, I read Solo's status as a negative thriller as a logical extension of many of the internal tensions I have identified in the earlier two novels. Like The Dogs of War, Solo is deeply attuned to the role of economic power in shaping the possibility of political sovereignty. More specifically, Solo makes central an idea that is only lightly alluded to in Forsyth: that the thriller's hero might, in the end, be essentially indistinguishable from the villains. And like Forty-Eight Guns, Solo's ideological orientation at times fits uneasily with the genre's emphasis on individualism. For Iroh, this tension had to do with his commitment to framing the Nigeria-Biafra conflict as a "people's war"; for Boyd, the tension centers on the novel's depiction of a world in which "rogue action" is always already coopted by the state. In other words, the thriller demands that the hero at times work outside of legitimate structures—but in Solo, there is no outside. What makes the novel a negative thriller is that Boyd makes this tension explicit for the reader; by the novel's close, even Bond himself has recognized it. It is this final plot twist that gives Solo its unconventional angle on the war thriller: depicting a world in which state sovereignty is all the more powerful for being widely dispersed.

This geopolitical world, though ostensibly reflecting 1960s Nigeria, strikes me as equally shaped by a more recent conflict: the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Solo was published in 2013, two years

106 The novel's opening sequence—Bond's memory of a WWII battle in France—ensures that the reader's first glimpse of Bond situates him some twenty-five years in the past.
after the last British forces had withdrawn from Iraq and at a time when analysis and critique of the UK's role in the war was a recurrent subject of public debate. Read from this angle, Solo layers onto its depiction of British involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra war a second moment of intervention in a former colony: Iraq in the early 2000s. One of the effects of this choice is to articulate a link between the role of British power in these two conflicts: in both cases, British state interests are advanced through supple and distributed forms of power—including collaboration with private business interests—rather than through the treaties or agreements that ostensibly structure international law.

I will mention briefly just two ways in which Solo seems to me to work with this history. First is its depiction of oil politics. In the novel, CIA agent Felix Leiter explains to Bond that US and UK meddling in Zanzarim is rooted in a desire to develop sources of oil other than "the proverbial powder-keg" of the Persian Gulf. Leiter is eloquent on the subject: "Islam, Palestine, Israel, Shia and Sunni—it's a goat-fuck." In the diegetic world of the text, Leiter is referencing the 1967 Six Day War, which significantly disrupted the supply of Middle Eastern oil to the UK; historically speaking, this disruption was a key reason that the UK sought to shift towards greater reliance on Nigerian oil. Yet there is a curious sense in which Leiter is speaking to two conflicts simultaneously: "Palestine, Israel" directly references the Six Day War, while "Shia and Sunni" (for contemporary readers) evokes the 2003 Iraq War. Indeed, declassified papers have shown that, in October and November of 2002, senior British officials met with Shell and BP representatives to discuss ways to ensure that British companies would have ample opportunity to develop Iraqi oil fields. One

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107 The Iraq Inquiry, better known as the Chilcot Inquiry, had concluded its analysis in 2011 but would not be released publicly until 2016.
108 Boyd, Solo, 308.
official in the Foreign Office, for instance, emphasized the government's commitment to ensuring that UK oil companies get "a fair slice of the action" (especially as compared to US companies).\textsuperscript{111} Boyd's novel anticipates these disclosures by putting very similar language into Bond's mouth. When he reports back to his boss at the novel's end, he assures M that "the scramble for Zanzarim's oil is in full enthusiastic swing" and that "every oil company in the world want[s] a piece of the action."\textsuperscript{112} In response, M notes approvingly that British oil companies "are at the head of the queue."\textsuperscript{113} Bond, stung by the fact that he has been manipulated, replies with a touch of anger:

'All's well that ends well,' Bond said. 'For both of us.'
'Us?'
'The British and the Americans. We seem to be sitting pretty.'
'And what could be wrong with that?' M stood up, signalling that the meeting was at an end.... 'Don't go there,' he said, his voice leavened with delicate warning. 'It's not our affair.'\textsuperscript{114}

Bond exits this adventure physically unscathed but morally troubled. He reflects grimly on lessons learned: when "absolute power" acts forcefully and ruthlessly, "everything can be made to happen."\textsuperscript{115} For this reader at least, there are echoes here of the account of American imperial power attributed to Karl Rove: "when we act, we create our own reality."\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Edward Chaplin, Foreign Office Middle East Director, quoted in Bignell, "Secret Memos Expose Link Between Oil Firms and Invasion of Iraq", n.p.
\item Boyd, \textit{Solo}, 313.
\item Boyd, \textit{Solo}, 313.
\item Boyd, \textit{Solo}, 314.
\item Boyd, \textit{Solo}, 309.
\item The full quote, from Ron Suskind's 2004 essay "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush," is as follows: The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." See Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush," \textit{New York Times}, October 17, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html. (Suskind does not identify the aide, though many subsequently speculated that he is Karl Rove.)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
That resonance underscores another way in which Solo's mapping of the world-system departs from the two earlier thrillers: here, the US is a central player. Much of Solo's second half takes place in Washington D.C.; the climactic showdown is set in northern Virginia, and the CIA turns out to be far more central to the conspiracy than MI6. This element of the novel is a fairly substantial departure from the historical record, as US involvement in the Nigerian Civil War was relatively limited. (Much to the irritation of both sides, each of which—for different reasons and at different times—anticipated more forceful US support.) British predominance is even more striking if we look specifically at the role of oil in the war, which centered on the dual claims by Biafra and Nigeria to royalties and taxes owed on commercial petroleum extraction in "their" territory. While in theory this issue affected a number of oil companies, including Pittsburgh-based Gulf Oil, in practice it became a conflict with (British) Shell-BP. So while the UK government and Shell-BP executives did meet frequently and share a great deal of information, especially in the first months of the war, neither the US government nor US-based oil companies were significantly involved in this politicking. Thus, the image of a tight trans-Atlantic partnership rooted in intelligence sharing speaks far more to the early 21st century "War on Terror" than to 1960s Nigeria.

117 Perhaps appropriately, one of the book jacket blurbs is from Valerie Plame, the former CIA agent whose identity was leaked as part of political scandal surrounding the shoddy US intelligence justifying the Iraq war.
118 Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970, 65. In July 1967, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggested that the war was "primarily a British responsibility." This attitude did not change much in subsequent years, despite a swell of pro-Biafra organizing in the US.
119 This was the case for two reasons. First, Shell-BP was far and away the primary oil producer in Nigeria at the time, responsible for 84% of Nigerian oil production: most of the oil money at stake was tied to Shell-BP's concessions. Second, Shell-BP was in the unique position of operating in both contested Biafran-held territory and within straightforwardly Nigerian territory (in Midwest State). This put Shell BP in a tricky situation—wanting to retain access to its installations in the East by appeasing Biafra, but wary of antagonizing the Federal Government, which could if it chose undermine the company's prospects in the Midwest. The only US company producing oil in Nigeria, in contrast, was Gulf Oil, which accounted for only 9% of Nigeria's total crude oil production in 1967. Gulf Oil's political position was also far simpler, since it operated wholly in the Nigeria's Midwest State. The company thus had no incentive to support Biafra and continued to pay royalties to the federal government (and to export oil) throughout the war. See Uche, "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War," 122 and Stremlau, The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970, 73-77.
In noting these contemporary resonances, I don't claim that *Solo* is "really" about the war in Iraq. Rather, I want to suggest the ways in which 21st century novels about Biafra tend to become, also, novels about subsequent conflicts—highlighting both continuities and changes. Looking at *Solo* in the political context of the 2010s as well as the 1960s helps us recognize that Boyd's depiction of British power in postcolonial West Africa bears a remarkable similarity to the forms of sovereignty more commonly depicted in what has been called the "war on terror" thriller: the 21st century thrillers that directly depict the post-9/11 Western security state. As Andrew Pepper argues, these more recent thrillers usefully foreground forms of sovereignty that refuse to be neatly circumscribed by state territory, bringing into view "new forms of transnational connectivity that cannot be reduced to a struggle between the orderly state system and the chaotic international realm." This is just the sort of world we encounter in *Solo*, where the distinction between internal and external almost wholly disappears. Bond moves smoothly across national borders, producing bribes and forged passports with a magician's ease. British military advisors melt into the Zanzari forest; conversations on one continent cause state murders on another. The kidnapping and extradition of Dahum's leader, a central plot point, is essentially a case of extraordinary rendition *avant la lettre*. The power of the US and British states in this world is slippery, diffuse, difficult to pin down—not least because allegiances and alliances are opaque and ever-shifting. Yet it is this very flexibility, Boyd suggests, that makes these dominant states so effective; their power, like water, fills all available crevices.

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120 As suggested in Chapter Three, where I argue that *Who Fears Death* uses the Nigeria-Biafra conflict to write Darfur.
This chapter has made two central arguments vis-a-vis the thriller. First, I have argued that this genre makes visible for the reader the ways in which state power operates beyond the formal structures of the state. Focusing on tropes such as the final plot twist, the deep-seated conspiracy, and the hero's competitive individualism, I have suggested that the thriller is a form well suited to narrate the failure of Biafran independence. Though the novels considered here are written from diverse standpoints and take a range of views on the war, they share two fundamental commitments. One, each novel highlights the significance of non-state actors, particularly mercenaries and corporate interests. Two, each novel suggests that these non-state actors are in fact deeply entwined with certain elements of the state, breaking down a clear binary between state and non-state actors. Together, these commitments decenter state-to-state diplomacy, locating political efficacy in the mercenaries and corporations who seamlessly cross borders.

Second, despite these shared tropes, each novel offers a strikingly different notion of how to imagine Biafran sovereignty. In Frederick Forsyth's *The Dogs of War*, sovereignty is essentially incarnated in the person of the General: as long as the General is elevated to political power (by whatever means), Biafra's future is assured. In keeping with Forsyth's focus on his mercenary protagonists, this framing of Biafran sovereignty gives scant attention to the people(s) the General is to lead. In response, Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* makes the Biafran people central; over and over again, his hero Col. Chumah asserts that the war is a people's struggle. Yet the genre itself makes it difficult for Iroh to fully represent "the people," since the novel's focus is continually pulled back to the individualistic hero. It is not until William Boyd's 2013 *Solo* that these tensions are made fully explicit. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this most recent novel is the darkest of the set. Though its hero's sympathies are ultimately aligned with Biafra, the novel offers no vision at all of Biafran sovereignty. Rather, it depicts a world governed by a tightly woven conspiracy of oil interests, in which powerful states like the US and UK shape what is and isn't imaginable.
Indeed, while earlier chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated how war writing idealizes and aspires toward legal standards—whether framed in terms of civilization or human rights—the thrillers discussed in this chapter are much more skeptical about the promise of international law. These thrillers place their trust instead in individualist heroes who have learned, through bitter experience, to make their own rules. This orientation is most clearly evident in Solo, with its emphasis on diffuse flows of economic power and its mournful acceptance of a deeply unjust world order. Yet even the thrillers by Forsyth and Iroh, which ostensibly offer happy endings, have an elegiac undertone: both writer and reader know that the closure they imagine—Biafran independence—is a fiction. So if the bulk of this dissertation argues for the importance of Biafran war literature to the legal discourse of sovereignty, this final chapter does something a little different, focusing instead on a set of texts attuned to the limits of that discourse. As a sub-genre, the Biafra thrillers are less an appeal to the law than a bitter reflection on its limit.

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122 In Forty-Eight Guns, Col. Chumah orders his men to execute captured Nigerian prisoners with the cry, "to hell with the Geneva Conventions." Chumah, of course, is the novel's hero. See Iroh, Forty-Eight Guns, 22.
Coda

Beyond Human Rights?

If Biafra novels were solely a feature of the 20th century, they might be read primarily as a relic of an earlier era—an attempt by those who witnessed the war to craft a particular narrative of what happened and what it meant for future readers. Yet these novels continue to be written, reimagining a half-century-old conflict in ways that speak to the questions and travails of the 21st century. In closing this project, I am interested in the ways in which new literary visions of the civil war continue reframe questions of rights beyond self-determination. To that end, I offer a few brief reflections on a fascinating novel published as I was writing this dissertation, Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019).

*War Girls* is explicitly a novel of the Nigeria-Biafra war—it centers on a brutal war between two nations named as such—but it is set in 2172 in a world reshaped by technological innovation and the ravages of climate change. Central to the plot are two sisters, Ify and Onyii, who begin the novel together in a camp of Biafran child soldiers—the titular war girls, a contemporary reframing of Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972). The sisters are separated early on when Ify is kidnapped during a Nigerian raid, and remain apart through most of the novel. Onyii stays with the war girls and grows into a brutal and effective paramilitary fighter, while Ify is adopted into an elite Abuja family that encourages her flair for technological innovation. Although Onyebuchi's Biafra does ultimately win independence from Nigeria, the novel's close suggests that the new state will be trapped by the same exploitative economic relations that it fought Nigeria to escape.

Despite its setting in the far future, *War Girls* repeatedly invokes international human rights law as a framework for thinking about the violence that its protagonists both suffer and inflict.
Typically, these invocations are general: "galactic human rights law" or "human rights accords." Not incidentally, the one legal text that the novel references specifically is the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Whether general or specific, however, the novel's engagement with human rights law serves mainly to highlight the latter's limitations; human rights are invoked only in the moment of their violation, and none of those violations are ever redressed through legal means. At the level of plot, then, *War Girls* represents human rights law in a way largely familiar to readers: though it provides a language with which to identify rights violations, it struggles to prevent or repair them.

Yet I want to suggest here that *War Girls* also makes a more subtle intervention in the discourse of human rights, underscoring the limits of that legal framework by repeatedly circling one crucial question: what is a human? Nearly all of the novel's characters (and certainly all of its protagonists) challenge the normative conception of the human in which human rights are conceptually grounded. The history of human rights is in part the history of the expansion of the category of "human," from an early focus on propertied white men to the more capacious understandings that dominate today. If a coherent notion of human rights in the 21st century depends on "a rigorous reexamination of the idea of the human," then I suggest here that *War Girls* offers such a reexamination by focusing on two key ways in which the novel's central characters challenge the notion of the human enshrined in human rights law. First, they are children. Second, their very selves are constituted in part through technology. Both of these attributes make them liminal creatures—both more and less than the paradigmatic (adult, white, male) human around

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whom modern human rights law was initially imagined. In briefly examining some of the ways in which War Girls destabilizes the category of the 'human', I suggest here that the novel pushes against the conceptual limits of human rights—including, perhaps, the right of self-determination, so crucial to the ideology and rhetoric of the war itself.

Nearly all of the central characters in War Girls are children. This may seem an obvious statement, but the choice to center children makes Onyebuchi's novel unusual among Biafran war narratives. In exploring children's suffering and children's agency, War Girls invites readers to reckon with the puzzling category of the child, which Jacqueline Bhabha has described as a striking compound of opposites:

...at once separate from adulthood because particularly vulnerable, and thus deserving of special protection, and at the same time similar but inferior to adulthood in its capacity for agency and entitlement to autonomy, subjecthood, and voice.

Human rights law, Bhabha points out, was formulated largely by and for adult subjects. Neither the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) nor the subsequent ICESCR and ICCPR (both 1966) deal with children's rights in any sustained way. In the rare cases that these documents mention children, they do so only to affirm children's' particular vulnerability and need for special protection. Yet as Bhabha suggests, this focus on vulnerability leaves little room for children's agency, an agency that is particularly visible in cases where children act in ostensibly un-child-like ways: as, for example, the child soldier. Certainly, many child soldiers are coerced to fight, but the line between coercion

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4 Lynn Hunt, Inventing Human Rights: A History, First published as a Norton paperback (New York, NY London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 151. As Hunt argues, the relatively restrictive early principles of, for example, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) ultimately "set in motion ways of thinking that fostered more radical interpretations" including expanding rights to women and enslaved persons.

5 One important antecedent is Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy, discussed in Chapter 3. However, Sozaboy features many adult characters even as it focuses on Mene's experience as a teenager. War Girls, in contrast, contains almost no adult characters. The only significant characters who are not children are the two Nigerian siblings Daren and Daurama. Though formerly child soldiers, they have aged out of the category of "child" by the time the novel begins.

and consent is not always as bright as we might wish: within a landscape of threat and constrained choices, some children may find the relative security of joining a group of fighters to be the best of bad options. Others may be genuinely drawn to the ideals of fighting—whether for the "dream of Biafra" or for some other notion of liberty, self-determination, or security. By virtue of their childhood, child soldiers have suffered human rights abuses—but it is also possible that they are legally or morally responsible for the suffering they have inflicted on others? In short, child soldiers confound the categories of victim and perpetrator, making them complex subjects for human rights narratives.

Child soldier narratives—of which I consider War Girls one—must either sidestep or engage this problem. This subgenre has grown particularly strong over the last two decades, as child soldiers have become a more visible subject of human rights campaigns. We might think of novels such as Florent Couao-Zotti’s Un enfant dans la guerre (1996), Ahmadou Kouroma’s Allah n’est pas obligé (2000), Tierno Monénembo L’Aïné des orphelins (2000), and Emmanuel Dongala’s Johnny bien méchant (2002)—the latter also adapted into a well-reviewed film in 2008. This initial surge of writing was followed by a second, Anglophone wave: Uzodinma Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation (2005), Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s Moses, Citizen & Me (2005), and Chris Abani’s Song for Night (2007). The early 21st century also saw the publication of quite a few child soldier memoirs, prominent among them Ishmael Beah’s 2007 A Long Way Gone. As Aaron Bady notes, this sudden efflorescence of child soldier narratives meant that a new genre took shape quite quickly:

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8 The recent ICC trial of LRA commander Dominic Ongwen raises an even stickier version of this question. Ongwen, now in his 40s, was kidnapped by the LRA when a young boy. He rose through the ranks and subsequently became a high-level commander. In February 2021, the Court found him guilty of 61 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity—including, notably, the crime of conscripting child soldiers. Though Ongwen’s status as a former child soldier may yet affect his sentencing, it does not seem to have affected the Court’s determination of his guilt. See "Public Redacted Trial Judgment 1076," ICC-02/04-01/15, February 4, 2021, https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2021_01026.PDF.
Before 2000, it wouldn't have made sense to talk about “the African child-soldier narrative”; no such genre existed. By 2008, it names an immediately recognizable object, both in marketing terms and in terms of literary genre.9

These texts represent a kind of limit-case for human rights discourse for precisely the reasons articulated by Jacqueline Bhabha: they must navigate the tension between the child-as-innocent-victim and the child-as-moral-agent. Maureen Moynagh argues that writers of child-soldier narratives have turned to a range of narrative strategies to manage this feat, including the sentimental tale, the *bildungsroman*, and the *picaresque*. She suggests that while some third-person accounts of child soldiers stick to simplistic portrayals of the child soldier as a passive victim in need of intervention, many of the novels and first-person accounts preserve the complexity to which Bhabha gestures.10

In the case of *War Girls*, the novel uses the ambivalent status of its child protagonists to problematize the very category of the human. Consider, for instance, the character Agu, a child soldier and a kind of younger helper to the protagonist Onyii. Agu shares a name with the protagonist of Iweala's 2005 *Beasts of No Nation*, (which has itself been considered a Biafra novel by some).11 Onyebuchi's invocation of Iweala's earlier novel is apparent in the striking grammatical structure of Agu's speech, which in both cases leans heavily on the present progressive. This grammatical evocation of *Beasts of No Nation* is present throughout *War Girls*, and the parallel

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11 For example, John Hawley writes that *Beasts of No Nation* "transcends the Biafran War, and yet seems fully to embody it." See John C. Hawley, “Biafra as Heritage and Symbol: Adichie, Mbachu, and Iweala,” *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 2 (2008): 15–26, 22. Some of this tendency to read Biafra into *Beasts* is no doubt due to Iweala's family background (he is Nigerian-American). And in fairness, *Beasts of No Nation* does affiliate itself with Nigerian/Biafran literature in subtle ways: the title, though most obviously referencing Fela Kuti, invokes a phrase initially used by Achebe in *No Longer at Ease* and later picked up by Soyinka in *Seasons of Anomy*. Still, the political and military situation that *Beasts of No Nation* describes seems to me far more akin to the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s. To the degree that *Beasts* comments on Nigeria, perhaps it invokes that country's decision to shelter former Liberian president Charles Taylor between 2003 and 2006. (Taylor was subsequently apprehended, tried, and convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the Special Court for Sierra Leone; one of the convictions was for conscripting child soldiers).
becomes impossible to miss when Onyebuchi very nearly repeats the last line of Iweala's novel: "I am doing horrible things, but...once upon a time, I am having mother and father and they are loving me." Here, Agu asserts both his culpability and his vulnerability—and though the "once upon a time" seems to locate his childhood in the past, his unconventional use of the present progressive suggests that his innocence and his responsibility are coterminous. He is simultaneously, the grammar suggests, a wounded child and a ruthless fighter.

The same could be said for War Girls' protagonist, Onyii. We meet her when she is fifteen; she has been a child soldier, we later learn, since the age of eight. During the intervening years, Onyii has committed awful acts of violence—including executing her adoptive sister Ify's biological family, an act for which she disavows responsibility with the cry "I was just a child...I did what I was told." There is no question that Onyii has been exploited, and that the trauma of inflicting violence on others is carved deep into her psyche. After killing a group of unarmed hostages (in the novel's present-day), her body reacts forcefully, shaking and retching. She struggles to identify her feelings—"Is this grief? Is this fatigue? Is this fear?"—pushing away emotions that might render her vulnerable and seizing instead on a numbing fury. She also comes to rely increasingly on an indigenous drug to soothe herself before and after battle. As the novel progresses, she cycles between rage and numbness, doing all she can to avoid fully reckoning with the violence she has experienced and inflicted.

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12 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 329. Iweala's Agu closes his first-person account nearly identical language: "I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men...but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me." See Uzodinma Iweala, Beasts of No Nation, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 141-42. This sort of "rotten English" also clearly invokes a much earlier child soldier novel, Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy, discussed in Chapter 3.
13 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 92.
14 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 407.
15 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 253.
16 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 253.
17 The drug, intriguingly, is made from the same Biafran minerals that are so coveted by both Nigeria and the European Space Colonies—framing the larger geopolitical drive to extract mineral resources as a kind of intoxication or addiction (a futuristic rendering of the idea of being "addicted to oil").
Yet *War Girls* also insists that its child soldiers are moral agents who, despite their histories, can take responsibility for their actions. It is no coincidence that Onyebuchi makes his protagonist fifteen years old; according to what the novel winkingly calls the "Centauri Convention on the Rights of the Child," it is only children "under fifteen years of age" who may not legally serve as combatants.¹⁸ That Onyebuchi is just fifteen places her exactly on this cusp, underscoring the novel's commitment to representing her autonomy as well as her need for protection. In the course of the novel, Onyii receives two orders likely to strike the reader as particularly troubling. The first is to execute a group of foreign hostages; the second to execute her helper Agu. The first she obeys unhesitatingly; killing the hostages is necessary to protect her fellow war girls. The second she disobedies, instead instructing Agu to flee into the forest. Though the reader may not agree with Onyii's decisions, there is a clear moral calculus in each case—and a clear moral cost. In the novel's denouement, Agu seeks out Onyii and sacrifices his own life to save hers. Onyii, meanwhile, accepts that she will either go to prison for life or herself be executed as punishment for executing those civilian hostages.¹⁹ Neither child, that is, will live to see the "dream of Biafra" for which they fought—even though that dream is formally realized with the creation of the independent Republic of Biafra by the novel's end. In other words, *War Girls* refuses what Moynagh terms the "impulse to save the child from the soldier", sidestepping a plot of *Bildung* that would close the novel with the

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¹⁸ Onyebuchi, *War Girls*, 159. This specific instance of human rights law comes up when Ify, having been adopted into the family of a high-placed Nigerian commander, tours a detention site where captured Biafran child soldiers are being held. Ify is horrified to see the children held in individual cells, dirty, tethered by collars that will explode if they attempt to flee. Thinking to herself that these are "war crimes," she points out that the Centauri CRC protects children "under fifteen years of age" from being classified as "enemy combatants," even if they are carrying a weapon. The law also provides, she insists, that such children "cannot be held captive for longer than seventy-two hours before being granted access to civilian shelter within the borders of the enemy state." The latter claim, in particular, is interestingly specific—especially because, unlike the former, it does not approximate any language actually in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rather, the seventy-two hours rule evokes current US law on the detention of child migrants—as does Onyebuchi's framing of these detainees as "children in...cages." So although the novel certainly engages with the global problem of child soldiers, it also provides a sharp critique of children's rights violations in the contemporary US.

child's reintegration into the social world. Instead, the novel ends with Agu's death and Onyii's total exclusion from Biafra's future—an exclusion that, the novel suggests, she has accepted as the cost of taking moral responsibility for her actions.

Thus far, I have written about *War Girls* as primarily a child soldier novel, and it is certainly that. But it is also a speculative fiction, imagining a future in which the line between human and nonhuman persons grows ever hazier. Onyebuchi's characters are complex subjects with interiority and ethical awareness, but they are not always "human" in terms recognizable to contemporary readers: some are androids, some are "cyberized" humans, and some are synths, creatures pieced together from the damaged bodies of the war dead. These creatures are liminal in some of the same ways that children are, raising questions about autonomy, agency, and responsibility. If Onyebuchi's child protagonists expose the limits of the notion of "human" on which human rights is built, then so too does the novel's vision of a future in which humans and technology are mutually constitutive.

Onyii herself exemplifies this complexity: she is an "Augment" whose flesh-and-blood body is strengthened by hi-tech protheses. An arm she lost in battle is replaced with a marvelous stand-in, sizzling with electricity and connected to her body with delicate wires tended by nanobots.

Similarly, the war girls' commander, Chinelo, is internally "cyberized" and can connect directly to various networks and data streams, downloading and sharing information through her very body.

Onyi's sister Ify wears a small piece of technology in her ear that allows her to see data and wireless...
networks moving all around her, "a series of pulsing blue dots...a forest of nodes and vectors." Her Accent allows her to hack into networks and even—given the world she lives in—into the cyberized bodies of others. Throughout the novel, the war girls routinely use themselves, and each other, as forms of technology as well as human beings. In the midst of battle, one girl pulls a wire out of a socket in her neck, plugging herself into a control panel that provides access to mechanized weaponry. Another plugs herself directly into a comrade in order to share intelligence she's collected. In the novel's climactic chase scene, a desperate Ify literally jump-starts her dying sister with a motorbike cable.

The protagonists' attitude towards this technologization of human bodies is ambivalent. Throughout the novel, Onyii is repulsed by the cyberized elements of her own body; part of the "lofty and invisible" dream of Biafra for her is the chance to imagine herself as something other than an Augment:

...when she thinks of Biafra, she thinks of buildings of glass and stone and steel that scrape the sky and paved streets and clean fruit that you can eat straight off the trees...In this dream, her arm has a proper skin attached to it instead of the black band she always wears, and every time she looks at it, she doesn't have to be reminded that it is metal and fears and circuitry and maybe she can convince herself that it's proper flesh and blood and bone. In this dream of Biafra, she's fully human.

Later in the novel, Onyii acquires a mechanized eye and a cyberized skin graft that covers half her face and shoulder, a modification that renders her, in her own judgement, "barely...human." One way to read this physical transformation, of course, is as a metaphor for war's dehumanizing effects.

As Onyii jogs through the war girls' camp in the novel's opening pages, she sees the younger girls

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24 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 15.
26 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 36-7.
27 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 214.
28 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 422.
29 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 27.
30 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 119.
patrolling the perimeter, weapons in hand. The young ones, she notes with approval, are "turning into steel, turning into the type of girls who can be depended on during an attack." Though Onyii presumably means this metaphorically, it is literally true in her case: war has taken (parts of) her human flesh and replaced them with steel. The comment suggests that even for those girls who escape severe wounds, the experience of war will transform them into something else, something powerful and dangerous and not entirely human. Yet the novel suggests that this transformation is both inevitable and, in some ways, attractive. "An Augment," Onyebuchi asserts, "is not an ugly thing." Despite Onyii's uncertainty, War Girls suggests that its protagonists are not less but more than human—as, indeed, the term 'Augment' suggests.

The line between human and nonhuman persons is even more dramatically blurred by Onyii's assistant Agu, who belongs to a class of persons known as synths. The synths appear to be young boys, highly trained in the military arts, each attached to one of the war girls as a kind of helper. Yet the boys are strangely expressionless and passive, like "android[s] waiting to be told what to do." Indeed, we learn that they are androids of a kind, stitched together from the bodies of profoundly wounded Biafran civilians in the aftermath of Nigerian bombing raids—those just "alive enough" to survive cyberization:

A collection of body parts fused onto an artificial skeleton. A collection of other people's memories thrown into a single braincase...a body implanted with just enough neural data to fake being a person, then sent on its mission. No soul. No thought to call their own.
One of the war girls tries to convince Onyii that creating the synths is an act of mercy: "We're giving them a chance to strike back...this is what they would want," she argues. But Onyii is unconvinced. How, she asks, "can a synth want?"

This question, which initially seems to be rhetorical, ultimately animates much of the rest of the novel. Onyii's synth, Agu, initially unnerves her: given an order to practice shooting, he continues for hours through a thunderstorm, chilled and shaking, long after the others have gone inside to eat. The boy seems "broken," she thinks—until she reminds herself that he's not a boy at all. Another war girl, Ginika, advises Onyii to view Agu not as a "boy" but as a "weapon." Yet after Ginika is killed in a raid, it's clear that her own synth, Golibe, is devastated by her loss. Golibe secretly watches old recordings of Ginika and pushes his body until it begins to fall apart; eventually, he kills himself. Onyii, fascinated and horrified, watches Golibe's unravelling and wonders if this is "how they mourn"? Months later, when the synth program is shut down, a commander orders Onyii to execute Agu, noting dismissively that "they're just synths." The reader, however, cannot view Agu as simply a lifelike machine: we see him learn to love music, we see him missing his parents, and we ultimately see him sacrifice his life to save Onyii's.

In these ways and others, Onyebuchi's depiction of Augments and synths—like his focus on children—pushes at the normative conception of the human. Though I have not emphasized questions of gender and race in this brief reading of War Girls, these categories are of course also relevant to a novel centrally focused on Black girlhood. The novel even touches briefly on the question of enslavement; the girls refer to the synths as abd—a word that, as Onyebuchi explicitly

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37 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 152-53.
38 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 153.
39 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 179.
40 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 151.
41 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 262.
42 Onyebuchi, War Girls, 273.
points out, means 'slave' in Arabic. How do these characters—who are variously children, girls, slaves, disabled, and marvels of technological engineering—fit into a legal/ethical regime oriented around human rights? In its attentiveness to those outside the conventional norms of humanity, *War Girls* participates in a discourse that has, at times, both expanded the conception of the human—and thus the remit of human rights—and has also, at other times, questioned the human rights paradigm altogether. So for example, a number of scholars in disability studies have turned away from what Julie Minich calls an "overinvestment in the human," one that obscures ethical obligations connecting humans to nonhuman animals and, perhaps, to the environment.\(^{43}\) I read *War Girls* as ultimately more aligned with this response to human rights, refusing as it does any kind of redemptive ending for its liminally-human protagonists.

In the end, the figure whose vision the novel most affirms is decidedly inhuman: it is the android Enyemaka, who responds with care to the living and dead alike. Like the novel's Augments, Enyemaka is a patchwork of salvaged technology, rusted and begrimed and moss-covered.\(^{44}\) Early in the novel, Enyemaka functions as a kind of robot babysitter, caring for Ify while Onyii take care of business around the camp. Enyemaka tends to Ify's hair; accompanies her to school, and responds with gentleness even when Ify lashes out at her. Ify, in turn, confides in Enyemaka her hopes and fears; though she knows the droid cannot feel in a human sense, she's nonetheless sure that Enyemaka cares for her.\(^{45}\) When the camp is bombed and the girls dispersed, Enyemaka finds herself on her own. As she regains sensory input, Enyemaka observes the vestiges of the attack all around: collapsed buildings, shattered glass, smoke, shell casings, broken bodies.

Some of them are clothed in what she recognizes as the Nigerian flag. Others wear patches on their jackets showing the flag that belongs to the Republic of Biafra. She doesn't remember who this land belongs to, whether it is Biafran or whether it lies within Nigerian

\(^{43}\) Minich, "A New Universal for Human Rights?", 51.
\(^{45}\) Onyebuchi, *War Girls*, 22.
territory. All she knows is that there were once people here.⁴⁶ Enyemaka's unwillingness to distinguish between Nigerian and Biafran distinguishes her from the novel's other characters, who are, without exception, aligned with one side or the other. Perhaps by virtue of her nonhumanity, Enyemaka is immune to claims of nationalism or political belonging. She does not see "any enemy," only the broken bodies of people who fought and died. Burying them, and marking their graves, becomes her solo project. In two "interludes" distinguished from the main action of the plot, Enyemaka roves this broken, brutalized world. She seeks out the dead, she buries them, and she marks the locations of all those graves. Crucially, the text emphasizes, she buries them all, "Nigerian and Biafran alike."⁴⁷

Enyemaka's refusal to side with one group or the other is, ultimately, the only path forward the novel can imagine. By the end, the text's key representatives of Biafra, the war girls, are scattered; their commander Chinelo lies in a coma and Onyii is dying of radiation poisoning. The novels' central Nigerian characters have also died. Of the major characters, only Ify seems to have a future. Ify, crucially, has identified at various points in the novel as both Biafran and Nigerian; she alone possesses the fluidity to shift between these identities. Yet as the novel closes, she renounces both loyalties, fleeing to space and committing to live as "neither Biafran nor Nigerian...just Ify."⁴⁸ Biafra's hard-won independence, is, from this perspective, simply Nigerian independence redux: a brief flowering of idealism that subsides quickly into corruption and cynicism.⁴⁹ If a nation-state is inadequate to the work of protecting either its land or its people, the novel seems to ask, then is it, too, simply a relic of an outmoded world order?

⁴⁶ Onyebuchi, War Girls, 106.
⁴⁷ Onyebuchi, War Girls, 297.
⁴⁸ Onyebuchi, War Girls, 395.
⁴⁹ This conceptualization of the relation between the two states echoes Buchi Emecheta's framing of Biafra as the hoped-for culmination of Nigerian independence, albeit with an even greater sense of disillusionment.
So although the novel's perspective throughout is largely aligned with Biafra, in the end it evinces a kind of exhaustion with the battle for self-determination—adopting instead the perspective of those who see beyond "Biafra" and "Nigeria." At first glance, this move away from Biafra itself might seem to be at odds with the resurgence of Biafra-based activism within Nigeria since 1999. Yet as Samuel Fury Childs Daly has observed, the recent upsurge of pro-Biafra enthusiasm might best be read not as an invocation of the politics of the 1960s but rather as "a vehicle to address problems like police brutality, economic stagnation, political malfeasance." From this perspective, "Biafra" is, by the 21st century, a kind of empty vessel, a container that can be reshaped to encompass a wide range of sociopolitical aspirations within contemporary Nigeria. In a similar manner, War Girls—as well as in other contemporary Biafra novels such as Who Fears Death—kneads the raw historical material of a fifty-year-old conflict into new shapes, asking fresh questions about the long legacy of colonialism, environmental devastation, and the claims (and limits) of the right to self-determination.

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*General Act of the Berlin Conference*. United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, the United States of America, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden-Norway, Turkey. February 26 1885.


