

Imagined Biafras: Fabricating Nation in Nigerian Civil War Writing

Jago Morrison

The Biafran war of 1967–1970 was the most violent phase in a complex series of convulsions that shook Nigeria in the wake of decolonization. Facilitated by British arms supplies from the Wilson Labour government, the conflict centred on the suppression of the break-away Republic of Biafra by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria.

That “Nigeria” was, from the outset, a pragmatic and ambivalent construction is hardly a matter of debate. As is well known, the current geopolitical divisions of West Africa were negotiated between Western European powers in the 1890s, and the emergence of “Nigeria” itself as a national idea can be traced to the London *Times* in 1897, when it is first proposed by the girlfriend of Frederick (later Lord) Lugard, Flora Shaw (*Times* 6). In a letter sketching out the Royal Niger Company’s West African territories, Shaw’s text conjures an exotic scene, populated by characters ranging from “pagan natives of low type who . . . had not risen above the cannibal stage” to “the pure bred Hausa [who] is perfectly black, but is, of course, of a far higher type than the ordinary negro” (6), unabashedly recapitulating the terms of mid-nineteenth century racial theory. Her text is replete with cultural, demographic and ethnographic misconceptions and inaccuracies which it would be too time-consuming to unravel here. What it does usefully provide, however, is a sense of the imagined entity that the term “Nigeria” is called forth to name at the close of the nineteenth century. It emerges from Flora Shaw’s pen in 1897 as a name for a loose, half-formed colonial construct which, for the sake of better understanding in London, now needs to be described by “some general name” (6). In this way “Nigeria” wins out over “Goldesia” as the common label for “the agglomeration of pagan and Mahomedan states which have been brought by the exertions of the Royal Niger Company” (6).

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways in which writings of the Biafran war attempt to see beyond the idea of “Nigeria.” If Nigeria’s institutionalization as a national idea proved resilient during the period of formal colonization, it had also survived without serious challenge at the transition to independence. Although alternative formulations of ethnic separatism, regional nationalism and socialist pan-Africanism were vigorously debated across the Black Atlantic during the 1950s in particular, by the time of independence popular anti-colonial sentiment in the region had strongly coalesced around the aspiration for an independent “Nigerian” nationhood. A decade later, however, the civil war period is one of much greater flux, in which that consensus has substantially unravelled, and in which several radically divergent notions of community are struggling to establish themselves. One of the key parchments on which those struggles are inscribed is the genre of Nigerian Civil War writing.

In an important way, it is to the novel and autobiography that the task has fallen of untangling the entire painful civil war experience, and of facing what Wole Soyinka calls this lacuna “that dogs our conscience and collective memory” (32). This is a literature within which we can see many subsequently influential thinkers and writers finding voice, from president Olusegun Obasanjo to the novelist and critic Chinua Achebe. Yet outside Nigeria itself, the diversity of writing that flowed out of the Biafran war has been largely neglected. Here I will focus on three texts in particular, emerging from three quite different locations and perspectives. Emeke Ojukwu’s *Ahiara Declaration*, first, is a political tract penned by the revolutionary leader at a fatal turning point in the Biafran struggle. In contrast, Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* is a postmodernist fiction written retrospectively and in exile from the United Kingdom. Finally I will look at *Sozaboy*, a novel by the Ogoni dissident Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose later struggles with the Nigerian military establishment ultimately led to his execution in 1995.

In the work of theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhabha and others, the liminal and transitional character of nation and nationalism has been extensively explored. In his 1990 introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha speaks memorably of nation

as a discursive terrain “where meanings may be partial because they are *in media res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image” (3). In the context of a war centred, for both sides, on the possibility of national survival, the uncertain texture of national discourse which Bhabha describes becomes a crucial problematic. Within a spiralling conflict scenario in which rival formulations of collective identity are inscribing themselves not only in rhetorical gestures but on the bodies of hundreds of thousands of civilians and recruits, the stability of hegemonic constructions, here most importantly the construction of “Nigeria” and “Biafra” themselves, is put radically at issue.

In his *Ahiara Declaration* of June 1969, the revolutionary leader Emeke Ojukwu offers the most developed formulation of Biafran nationalism to emerge from the writing of the civil war. Ojukwu articulates the Biafran project precisely in terms of a refusal of the neo-colonial condition he terms “nigerianism,” and a rejection of Nigeria itself as a “ramshackle creation that has no justification either in history or in the freely expressed wishes of the people” (11). Far from being driven by petty regionalism, he insists, secession from Nigeria arose from “a conflict between two diametrically opposed conceptions of the end and purpose of the modern African state” (10). Biafra is a refusal of the neo-colonial “tendency to regard the black man as culturally, morally, spiritually, intellectually and physically inferior,” embodying instead a “positive commitment to build a healthy, dynamic and progressive state, such as would be the pride of black men the world over” (8).

Notwithstanding Ojukwu’s rhetorical grandiosity, I would suggest, what is partly interesting about his text is its ultimate inability to constitute Biafra as a stable alternative idea, and for the way in which it ends up offering Biafran nationhood, very much as Bhabha suggests, as a discourse yet to be adequately articulated. As a narration of nation, many of the strategies of the *Ahiara Declaration* are quite canonical. All discursive means are marshalled to construct an image of continuity and cohesion against the grain of the actual cultural diversity of the region, and to project a unitary image of nationhood across the face of its real,

far more complex distribution of communal affiliations. In this effort, though, Ojukwu's attempt at nation writing is forestalled in a variety of interesting ways.

In a statement of the "Principles of the Biafran Revolution" the difficulty of defining who the Biafrans are quickly emerges. Frequently, the *Ahiara Declaration* shows the effects of this problem, in Ojukwu's continual reference to the distinctness of "our people" and their unique historical destiny, combined with an uncomfortable sense of ambivalence over quite who those people might be. In contemporary world media coverage of the civil war, Biafra was almost always characterised as the tribal homeland of the Ibo, statistically the major ethnic group in South Eastern Nigeria. In 1966, it was Ibo officers who led the January coup against the weak and nepotistic First Republic.¹ Six months later a counter-coup was accompanied by anti-Ibo pogroms, in which most commentators agree at least thirty thousand were killed. This explosion of violence led to a massive displacement of Ibos southwards towards the so-called "Ibo heartland" and a counter-migration of Hausa and Yoruba Nigerians away from the Eastern region. In the crucial international propaganda war, it is possible to see why, as a result of this, Ojukwu becomes paradoxically imprisoned within an imaginary projection of Biafra as an Ibo state, and how his text is impelled towards a representation of the conflict itself as a struggle to resist ethnic cleansing.

In practice in 1967, by no means all Nigerian Ibos had chosen to re-identify as Biafrans, with many remaining in Lagos and other areas of the Federation, whilst conversely, the effect of secession was to impose a Biafran national identity on Easterners from a whole range of ethnic groups. During the civil war itself, claims of violence and discrimination against minorities by the Ojukwu regime provided one of the most damaging points of attack against the legitimacy of the Biafran project by its critics. Given its evident military inferiority in the face of British weaponry, nevertheless, the importance of international media relations in Biafra's bid for national survival can hardly be underestimated. Hence it is possible to see how "Biafra" as a variegated and problematic political entity becomes overlaid by a virtual Ibo Biafra whose battle

for survival on screen and in print fuels the international attention and support which is, on the ground, indispensable to continued resistance of Nigeria.

In this sense, it is possible to see some of the reasons why Ojukwu's text seems to find itself trapped between the rhetorical force fields of "tribe" and "nation." One of the ways in which Ojukwu tries to write himself out of this difficulty is by invoking the language of "race," but this in itself proves no less problematic. Interestingly, his deployment of raced language in the *Ahiara Declaration* does not reflect the strategies we might associate, for example, with American Black Nationalism of the same period. In the context of radical Black thought in the US by the 1960s, arguably, the articulation of "racial" identity typically signals a kind of pragmatic essentialism, or rhetorical shorthand for the notion of a historically distinct black community. In Ojukwu's text, by contrast, the raced gaze is deployed much less ambivalently. Just as I have suggested that the image of the "Ibo nation" becomes established, over the course of the war, as an essentializing fiction of Biafra that in itself becomes part of Biafra's resistance, so too on a vaster level in Ojukwu's text, there is an attempt to mythologize the entire conflict as the expression of an international racial struggle. Where, in Shaw's 1897 text, the peoples of the Niger Delta are labelled by "type," here the raced, colonial gaze is boldly inverted, representing the "Anglo-Saxon British" as a pathological human sub-group:

The Anglo-Saxon British committed genocide against the American Indians. They committed genocide against the Caribbs. They committed genocide against the Australia Blackfellows. They committed genocide against the native Tasmanians and the Maoris of New Zealand. During the era of the slave trade, they topped the list and led the genocidal attempt against the Negro race as a whole. Today, they are engaged in committing genocide against us. The unprejudiced observer is forced in consternation to wonder whether genocide is not a way of life for the Anglo-Saxon British. Luckily, all white people are not like the Anglo-Saxon British. (8)

As we see here and elsewhere, Ojukwu's text attempts repeatedly to build layers of historicity into the idea of Biafra, especially with reference to the history of West African colonialism. Once again, however, the performance is far from seamless. While the South East did indeed have a particular experience of colonization at the hands of the British and others, it is difficult to present this as sufficiently distinct from the shared colonial experience which, only a few years before, had virtually united Nigeria in anti-colonial national sentiment. Above, Biafra is characterized as the latest casualty in the history of British genocide, but elsewhere Biafrans are historicized rather differently as the upholders of "Christian civilization" against the disease of Islam, this time on behalf of their "one time mentors" (5). Weaving this particular historical sub-narrative, Ojukwu traces back a threat from the "insatiable territorial ambitions" of Islamism and Arabism over more than a thousand years, mythologizing the Biafrans as an ancient bulwark against spiritual corruption: "Our Biafran ancestors remained immune from the Islamic contagion. From the middle years of the last century Christianity was established in our land. In this way we came to be a predominantly Christian people. We came to stand out as a non-Muslim island in a raging Islamic sea" (12–13). Here, clearly, the whole question of Christianity's imbrication with European colonialism is elided in an extremely problematic way, as we see Ojukwu trying to crowbar Biafra into history in any way he can.

In a sense what we see in the *Ahiara Declaration*, then, is the fascinating spectacle of a leader casting around for languages with which to articulate some viable idea of nationhood. On one level, this is no less than one would expect. At the same time, though, what is especially interesting about Ojukwu's text is the way in which it self-consciously exceeds and problematizes its own national project. Certainly, we need to consider the circumstances of its publication in June 1969, only months before the Biafran nation's total capitulation, at a time when its borders were shrinking by the day, and its besieged, traumatized population were beset with rampant malnutrition and disease. The *Ahiara Declaration* emerges at a moment when the prospects for Ojukwu's own survival are rapidly receding. It is a moment, too, when there seems no chance of long term military resistance to the overwhelming firepower supplied to

the Nigerian Federation by the British, in exchange for oil rights in the region and continuing political influence over Lagos.

Against this background it becomes clear, I think, that we need to read the *Abiara Declaration* on an important level, not as the program of a viable state, but instead as a gesture of compensation, or even memorialization of Biafra as an imagined enclave of national liberation, strength and resistance. To resist “Nigerianism” and bid for “true independence” is by its very nature a counter-imperialist gesture, Ojukwu suggests, and thus “Biafra” is offered as an alternative in principle to a “Nigeria” which is precisely the articulation of neo-colonial power. Nigeria is not by accident but by its very design, he argues, a “decadent and putrefying society” (10). It is a “corrupt and rickety structure . . . in a perpetual state of powerlessness to check foreign exploitation” (16). Biafra is doomed, Ojukwu already clearly implies, because it embodies an ideal of true decolonization, which remains intolerable:

Because the black man is considered inferior and servile to the white, he must accept his political, social and economic system and ideologies ready made from Europe, America or the Soviet Union. Within the confines of his nation he must accept a federation or confederation or unitary government if federation or confederation or unitary government suits the interests of his white masters; he must accept inept and un-imaginative leadership because the contrary would hurt the interests of the master race; he must accept economic exploitation by alien commercial firms and companies because the whites benefit from it. Beyond the confines of his state, he must accept regional and continental organisations which provide a front for the manipulation of the imperialist powers; organisations which are therefore unable to respond to African problems in a truly African manner. For Africans to show a true independence is to ask for anathematization and total liquidation. (12)

In fictions of the Nigerian Civil War, the deep sense of uncertainty and disquiet that emerges from the *Abiara Declaration* is often intensified. Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again* (1975), written soon after the end

of the fighting, smothers the notion of Biafra in a blanket of confusion, hurt and loss. Serially displaced by the conflict and fearful of the Nigerian “vandals,” the novel also shows Biafrans as deeply conflicted over questions of national identity. Similarly, to the extent that Chinua Achebe’s collection *Girls at War* (1972) can be seen as engaging in a national meditation, this is once again riven with ambivalence. The trajectory of Achebe’s title story is to trace the journey of Gladys, a young Biafran soldier, from patriotic zeal to disillusionment and exploitation. Interestingly, this particular story concludes with an unexpected twist, as in the final passage Gladys suddenly embraces her demise in an epiphanic moment of sacrifice, trying to save a fellow Biafran from an air attack. Each of these two texts employ, to a degree, the familiar strategies of war writing, in that they deal very largely with themes of human suffering and waste. At the same time, in both of them, the unanswered questions of nation and community, which hover within and behind all Nigerian Civil War texts are strangely forestalled or disallowed. In the two fictional texts I want to look at in more detail here, this is much less the case.

Destination Biafra (1982) has been spoken of by other critics of Emecheta’s work as the novel that contributes a gendered perspective to Nigerian Civil War writing. In fact, looking across the range of fiction within this genre it is clear that gender and sexuality are important concerns in many Nigerian Civil War texts, including the two I have mentioned above. What is far more distinctive and perhaps unique about Buchi Emecheta’s novel, however, is the way in which it combines issues of gender and sexuality with a very detailed negotiation of national formations and the idea of community.

Emecheta grew up in colonial Nigeria until the age of eighteen in an Ibo community at the edge of the South Eastern region. As a teenager, against her family’s consent she competed for a scholarship to an extreme anglophile colonial school, and she emigrated with her husband to the United Kingdom in 1962. Her first novels *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974), as can be inferred from their titles alone, deal with the cultural shock of living in Britain as a black woman and (by that time) single mother in the late 1960s. Later works return

to Nigeria, and also explore the cross-cultural impressions of Nigerians living in Britain.

During the civil war Emecheta was an active campaigner against British arms supplies to the Federal government, and *Destination Biafra* includes a scene of a rowdy demonstration in Trafalgar Square at which the author was present. Setting the novel in context, nevertheless, it is interesting and notable that both in Emecheta's earlier and her later fiction, there is what can best be described as a strategic amnesia about the Nigerian Civil War. Various narratives such as *Second Class Citizen* and *Kehinde* (1994) thread between Britain and Nigeria in ways that work dextrously around the conflict and enable it to remain untouched. The civil war is allowed to lurk in these texts as the unapproachable historical content, which evades narration. *Destination Biafra* stands out as an exception in that regard. It is highly specific in its historical engagements and includes detailed scenes featuring both ordinary Nigerians and powerbrokers, together with explicit meditations on the nature and justice of the Biafran project.

The novel's uniqueness in this way is largely enabled, I want to argue, by its distinctive, exilic sensibility, which is usefully compared to a better known fictional treatment of national independence and civil war, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Both of these novels, published in the early 1980s, examine the idea of nation very much in retrospect and with a migrant eye. In both, we see an approach to the historical, which is usefully thought of as postmodern. In common with other postmodernist texts, firstly, they each invite a consideration of historical discourse as constitutive, not simply descriptive, of its object. Secondly, in both texts we see a mode of characterization, which moves beyond verisimilitude or modernist 'psychological depth,' in favour of a self-reflexive use of caricature and pastiche. In each novel we have distorted portraits of recognisable historical figures, such as Indira Gandhi in *Midnight's Children* and the rival leaders Emeke Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon in *Destination Biafra*, deployed in a kind of political commentary that is both playful and sharply barbed. As Catherine Cundy notes in her study *Salman Rushdie* the vitriolic nature of Rushdie's critique of Gandhi through the figure of the Black Widow in *Midnight's Children*

was enough to provoke a (successful) lawsuit against him, when she was in her second term as Prime Minister of India. To the extent that Emecheta's Saka Momoh and Chijioke Abosi clearly function as recognisable pastiches of Gowon and Ojukwu, similarly, *Destination Biafra* runs its own political risks. In defiance of historical documentation, for example, Emecheta places both men amongst the revolutionary conspirators of January 1966, plotting a military takeover and personally arranging the executions of the democratically elected leaders of the Western and Eastern regions. Here, in a meta-historical move, Emecheta's text self-consciously circumvents canonical accounts in order to simplify and strengthen its presentation of the ideological context to Biafra's emergence, and in particular to suggest the mutual complicity of the rival leaderships in resolving to found a new nation in bloodshed. As the novel proceeds, we see how this joint commitment ultimately reconstitutes itself as internecine military conflict.

The opening section of the novel is, in this sense, deliberately programmatic, choreographing scenes and figures in order to explore the way in which the constitutional construction of "Nigeria" inaugurated by the British, as a system of three regions each dominated by one powerful ethnic group, worked to promote regional and tribal affiliations over national party allegiances and larger pan-Africanist aspirations. In this sense Emecheta's text facilitates an understanding of the ways in which the colonial settlement functioned to consolidate rather than ameliorate ethnic divisions.

Alongside the historical pastiches I have referred to, we also have figures who work in a metonymic or iconographic way. In *Midnight's Children* the opposition between Saleem and Shiva can be seen as working on one level as an opposition between models of what Rushdie calls the "India-Idea," perhaps summarized as Europhile liberal democracy and sectarian violence respectively (44). In *Destination Biafra* Emecheta uses the figures of the protagonist Debbie Ogedembe and her lover Alan Grey in a comparable way, deploying her characters strategically to articulate particular political, ethnic and economic positions and linkages. Like Rushdie's Saleem, Emecheta's heroine is placed in a paradoxical position of omniscience and victimhood. Though progressively disem-

powered, she is nevertheless able to move around, seeing everything, meeting everybody, including the leaders of both of the warring sides. Historically, like Saleem, she is both pivotal and marginal, privileged to see the war in all its facets, and yet ultimately powerless in the face of events. In a similar way, too, her counterpart Alan Grey is always hovering in the background of every negotiation, every reversal of fortune, every attempt at resolution. In this way both characters are set up to circle around the nature and possibility of “Biafra.”

In terms of the novel’s postmodernist allegory, the progress of these two figures is central. First, the figure of “Grey,” shading between black and white, can be seen as an invocation of undecidability and opacity. In my discussion of the *Ahiara Declaration* earlier, I suggested that one of the strategies of Ojukwu’s text is to reverse the colonial gaze so as to place the “Anglo-Saxon British” under a racial scrutiny. In *Destination Biafra* we see quite a different approach to the British. A representative of the neo-colonial presence in Nigeria, Grey is hardly ever brought into full focus by Emecheta’s text, but kept in the mid-distance, as a figure hovering at the edge of shadow. A spectre of equivocation and manipulation, he deals by proxy—in arms, in oil rights, in facilitating government borrowing and in weaving complex webs of dependency. At the same time, when his face does come to the light, Grey is the epitome of patrician liberalism, aloof, but at the same time—particularly as he explores Debbie sexually—caught by an infatuation with the colonial body, its “primitiveness, backwardness and savagery . . . excitement, richness, moistness, newness” (35).

Critics of Emecheta’s work such as Abioseh Porter have been hasty in their rush to read *Destination Biafra*’s distinctive use of characterization as a marker of stylistic limitation. In an essay on the novel in Marie Umeh’s collection *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, Porter finds particular fault with the “cartoon-like . . . implausible, idealised, and even preposterous situations and characters” (314-15) Emecheta presents. Grey offers an easy target for that kind of critique, in his apparently caricatured representation of the neo-colonial gaze. Against the kind of reading Porter proposes, though, I would suggest that, precisely through its postmodernist facility with caricature and conspiracy theory, *Destination Biafra*

is able to cut uniquely close to the bone in its portrait of British thinking and strategy towards Nigeria. Now that British governmental records relating to the Nigerian Civil War have been released under the 30 year rule, it is interesting to see how sharp Emecheta's representation of Grey is in the text. Here I will limit myself to quoting one confidential minute from the Ministry of Defence, written by the senior official co-ordinating arms procurement for the Nigerian Federation in 1968:

Present British policy seems to be to provide conventional weapons and ammunition to Nigeria (on a rather more lavish scale than we would probably be keen to admit in public), in the knowledge that while this is not doing very much towards bringing the war to an end, Nigeria could almost certainly buy the stuff somewhere else if we didn't provide it, and by letting her have it we retain a certain degree of influence in Lagos and the possibility of emerging with good relations when Nigeria ultimately wins, thereby ensuring access to the oil reserves in East Nigeria. If we stop supplying arms and ammunition to Nigeria we may derive some moral satisfaction, but we should do nothing to alter the military situation there and ultimately we may suffer undesirable diplomatic and economic consequences. (215)

Destination Biafra was written without benefit of access to classified official documentation, in which the vast scale of British arms supplies to the Federal Military regime is enumerated by the rocket, shell and bullet. In the light of such information, I would suggest, any argument on this topic must now shift to the question of how far both Emecheta's and other texts actually underestimate the enthusiasm of Harold Wilson's government to exploit the possibilities for arms sales to the Federal Military Government, and the strength of their determination to see the Biafran threat to British political and economic interests in West Africa crushed by overwhelming military force. If we go further into the British National Archive, in records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the same period, we find vigorous efforts to support the multi-million pound expansion plans of Shell-BP in the

Mid-West, a key disputed region. Some time later, of course, it was as a result of campaigning against Shell and BP's operations in this area that Saro-Wiwa ultimately lost his life when he was executed by the Nigerian Government in 1995. Moving back to *Destination Biafra*, nevertheless, it is clear that the postmodernist presentation of Grey needs to be read in terms of the way it enables Emecheta's text to incorporate an assessment of British involvement in the civil war, and through him to introduce one particular implied model of Nigeria, as a puppet state serving British global economic interests. In this sense Grey can be seen as just one of many elements in the novel's mosaic of possibilities, to set against the kind of counter-colonial analysis that is begun, but left hanging in Ojukwu's *Ahiara Declaration*.

With Emecheta's heroine Debbie Ogedembe, we find another kind of liminal figure, indexed in the most obvious way by her English/Itsekiri name. Debbie enters the novel as the "been-to" product of the anglophile Nigerian elite, with all the privileges of education, wealth, celebrity, and opportunity. Her father is the finance minister in the corrupt and nepotistic First Republic, and she is the sexual plaything of Grey. From this beginning, her journey towards "Biafra" then takes her through a series of humiliating encounters, during which she is forced to move further and further from these emotional and sexual involvements, and to recognize the very trappings of cultural superiority, including language and education, which constitute her passport to privilege and opportunity, as the markers of her continued colonization. It is in this way through Debbie Ogedembe's physical and ideological journey through the war that the novel develops an understanding of "Biafra" not as a stronghold of tribalism or regionalism, but as an alternate paradigm of Nigerian-ness itself. In a way which echoes and goes beyond Ojukwu's text, in other words, Debbie's Biafra comes to represent a rejection of Nigeria's merely nominal decolonization, and a projection of a more thoroughgoing ideal of gender, ethnic and class liberation. Biafra comes to name an emancipation which needs to take place first of all within the subject, and ultimately trans-nationally. The true destination for Biafrans is ultimately seen by Debbie as a "land of hope" (213) abandoned by the ailing, problematic Ojukwu regime, a principle of community beyond

tribe and class, in the face of which both his leadership and that of the Federal Military Government have been found wanting.

During the novel, the relationship between nation as an imagined entity and the obliterating logic of war is explored in different kinds of ways. One of the most striking examples features the simultaneous birth of sons to women on opposing sides of the war. While Debbie is crossing to the East with a group of Ibo women, a new advent for Biafra is first allegorized by the birth of a baby to one of her companions, at the side of the road in an Eastern wilderness. The mother of “baby Biafra” is devastated by the trauma of his birth, and dies almost straight away. Rather than being abandoned to an ignominious fate, however, the young child is adopted, nursed and cared for by the women collectively, and especially by Debbie, who undertakes to carry him as far as she can on her back, through the dangerous terrain of the war. Meanwhile, a second baby is born to the wife of the Nigerian Head of State, this time in a hospital with doctors and journalists clamouring to be in attendance. In a way, which is then, again, reminiscent of *Midnight's Children's* central magic realist conceit, Emecheta's text uses the device of the twin births to explore two alternate kinds of national nativity. In *Midnight's Children*, as we know, the twin lives of Saleem and Shiva become complexly entwined with each other, as well as with the discourses of independence they partly represent. In *Destination Biafra*, however, something altogether different happens. On one side of the equation, baby Biafra is born an orphan and dies a few days later on Debbie's back from dysentery, reduced to a mess of foul smelling liquid and “a shrunken lifeless skeleton” (202). And on the other side, the baby of Nigeria has to be cut out of its mother's body, a “monstrosity . . . a curse . . . [a] deformed piece of humanity” (193). Clearly, however we choose to interpret this sequence, it is difficult to read Emecheta's text as a narration of either Nigeria or Biafra as viable national projects. Rather, the effect of the text overall is to reassert nation and community as uncomfortable, unanswered questions, in the context of a historical situation in which none of the formulations on offer can be imagined as liveable solutions.

I suggested earlier that in many literary treatments of the Nigerian Civil War we do not seem to get far beyond a sense of waste and loss

as the driving dynamics of the conflict. With its exilic, postmodernist sensibility *Destination Biafra* is, perhaps paradoxically, more committed and more detailed in its political and ideological analysis than many other texts of the genre. To the extent that this novel is able to invoke some sense of critical distance and look beyond the documentation of suffering, nevertheless, it is no more than to transfigure it as a kind of purifying purge which might, in some way, be the necessary condition for the development of a future postcolonial consciousness. It is in this uncertain and speculative sense only, I would suggest, that the novel is able to draw some thread of redemption from the tangle of Biafra's distress and despair: "This is our war. It is the people's war. Our very first war of freedom" (153).

In the final scene, set in a bombed and besieged airfield, Emecheta's heroine witnesses the flight of the rebel leader and of the Englishman Grey, after she has refused the offer of patriarchal protection as his new servile African wife. Bereft of resources, the novel leaves her in a desolate landscape, clutching little more than an ideal to hold up to the future. "Biafra" no longer names the hope of a separate state, but only an imagined alternative to a Nigeria still firmly in the grip of colonialism. It remains a destination yet to be reached, a liberation that the privileged and positioned Nigerian elite have not yet elected to grasp.

Set against *Destination Biafra*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) offers quite a different perspective on national conflict in the Nigerian Civil War. Saro-Wiwa himself first became known as an environmental activist through his opposition to the activities of Shell-BP in the Ogoni region of South Eastern Nigeria. Although he was recognized as a poet and novelist in Nigeria during his lifetime, it was only after his execution by the Nigerian Military Government in 1995 that he began to be acknowledged globally as a writer of significance. During the Nigerian Civil War Saro-Wiwa began on the Biafran side, before crossing the front line to join the Federal forces. He subsequently became federal administrator of Bonny, an oil town in the southern coastal Rivers State, where he found himself increasingly at odds with the western-sponsored Nigerian elite.

Sozaboy's opening section is set between the fall of the corrupt First Republic and the birth of Biafra, although neither of those terms is ever used. The novel begins with images of popular jubilation, and then quickly moves into darker and more ambivalent territory:

Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first. All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with pear and knacking tory under the moon. Because the work on the farm have finished and the yams were growing well well. And because the old, bad government have dead, and the new government of soza and police have come. (1)

Cropping its perspective to a tightly localized setting, the novel opens with a sense of the popular optimism, which greeted the attempt in January 1966 to give independent Nigeria a second beginning. In his polemical *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996) Wole Soyinka remembers this period in idealized terms, as “our sixties dream of belonging to an unstoppable nation, rich in human and material resources, a nation endowed with a seeming gift of leadership, one whose citizens anywhere in the world would be revered, courted as plenipotentiaries in their own right, simply by the very possession of the Nigerian passport” (33). In Saro-Wiwa’s text, however, there is little pause for celebration. Already in his very first word, we are given the signal that this dreamlike intoxication with national sentiment will be momentary. Indeed, as the novel proceeds, it disperses completely, leaving us with nothing more than a carapace of community, a brittle surface held together by little but personal and sexual ambition, bribery, corruption, and private and institutionalised violence. As we can already see, then, in terms of its imaginary projection of the Biafran landscape, the novel offers something quite different from the thematics of sacrifice and liberation suggested by Emecheta’s text.

The full title of Saro-Wiwa’s novel is *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, and it is no surprise that in academic attempts to deal with this difficult text, Saro-Wiwa’s use of language has attracted the most discussion. In his author’s note, Saro-Wiwa describes his “rotten English” as a self-conscious construct which is not a Southern Nigerian pidgin, nor

standard English, but a hybrid form which “thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move, and have not his being” (ii). In the novel, the main character Sozaboy repeatedly meditates on the relationship between his own hybrid speech and that of Standard English, where the latter is seen as a marker of social status, wealth, and power. The language of his narrative, shaped by its pretensions to the colonial tongue, is as much of an accession as the soldier’s uniform he has donned so proudly. Repeatedly, there is reference to “big grammar” as a medium of power and fear, and to his ambition to be “big man . . . riding car and talking big big English” (11).

One of the central questions raised by Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*, as I suggested earlier, concerns the constitutive role of language in the articulation of what he usefully calls the “impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force” (1). Looking at the *Ahiara Declaration*, we have seen some of the ways in which Ojukwu’s text can be read as a hybrid construct, a strange patchwork of attempts to articulate a discourse of Biafran nationhood, in religious, historical, political and racial terms. What is particularly interesting about *Sozaboy* from the point of view of narrating the nation, by contrast to a text of that kind, is the way in which the novel seems to track this process in reverse. In Saro-Wiwa’s text we see no process of building, no struggle to articulate the counter-myths of Biafra or Nigeria as national ideas. Instead, *Sozaboy* seems to enact a disintegration, in language itself, of the possibility of national consciousness. The voice of the text, Sozaboy’s, is that of a fighter for the nation so ignorant that he does not even know its name, spoken in a “rotten” English which belongs nowhere and constitutes nothing.

If one expects to approach narration as the receptacle of nation, that is, as a site for the articulation of national identity, then *Sozaboy* becomes a particularly troubling novel to handle. In his collection of critical essays on the novel the critic Charles Nnolim is, for one, interestingly disconcerted by the language of Saro-Wiwa’s text. Indeed, Nnolim is actually so offended by the notion of “rotten-ness” that he goes so far as to re-name the novel *Sozaboy: A Novel in Unconventional English* (77). For Asomwan Adagboyin, writing in the same collection (30–38), Saro-Wiwa’s achieve-

ment with the novel is that he has founded a truly Africanized English, appropriating the lingua franca and re-inaugurating it as a means of authentic Nigerian expression. These readings, I think, each blunt the edge of Saro-Wiwa's text, which, read in its full rotten-ness, ultimately articulates neither principled resistance nor patriotic sentiment, but rather its inverse, as Saro-Wiwa warns, a discourse of dislocation.

Like *Destination Biafra*, the novel hinges on the opposition of a pair of characters who work primarily in a metonymic or metaphoric way. Neither has a proper name. Early in the story, the narrator abandons his name Mene, with its connotations of meanness and the menial, and comes to think of himself only as Sozaboy (soldier boy), becoming, in a way whose importance emerges later, indistinguishable from the ubiquity of confused, ignorant young recruits swallowed up by the conflict. In a dynamic that inverts the conventional bildungsroman, Sozaboy comes to little wider awareness by the end of his narrative, except a recognition of fear and waste, and gains little idea who or what he is fighting for.

Like Emecheta's Debbie Ogedembe, Sozaboy's character is balanced by an opposite number, Manmuswak, whose name is translated in the glossary simply as "a man must live (eat) by whatever means." In a sense he is, like Grey, a figure of pragmatic manipulation. Throughout the text he figures as Sozaboy's other self, appearing in shifting guises—in a bar, in a battlefield, in a hospital, in one army, in the other, and then retreating "like tall snake passing through the bush, making small noise" (97). In *Destination Biafra* I argued earlier that the figures of Grey and Debbie can be read in terms of the ways they are used to explore alternate paradigms of Nigerian/Biafran nationhood, just as Saleem and Shiva in *Midnight's Children* partly signify alternate conceptions of what Rushdie calls the "India-idea." As fighters on opposite sides of the Nigerian Civil War, it would be an obvious strategy for Ken Saro-Wiwa's text to use Sozaboy and Manmuswak in a similar way. *Sozaboy* absolutely resists that expectation. At various points in the text we find both protagonists alternating sides in the conflict, and these shifts occasion no political or ideological meditation. Only once in the novel do we even hear the name of a nation. Though he has lived in it all his life, Nugwa, that is Nigeria, is a foreign place Sozaboy has vaguely heard of. Called to mind

only by its association with kwashiorkor, it is less worthy a thing to die for, in his imagination, than that wasting disease of the flesh:

Kwashiokor. Kwashiokor. Kwashiokor. I am telling you, I like that name Kwashiokor. And you mean to say it is disease. If it is so, it will be a very good disease to kill somebody. Wait oh. So praps my mama and my Agnes can be suffering from this kwashiokor. Kwashiokor. When I think of that, I begin fear bad bad. So I asked the man whether that place is called Nugwa. (143)

I suggested earlier that the character of Sozaboy in Saro-Wiwa's novel on one level works to represent not one individual, but all the young recruits who were eaten up by the Biafran war. Once again in this metonymical strategy we can see parallels with other contemporary texts, and perhaps especially with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison's strategy in that novel is to take a figure absolutely from the margins of history, the murdered daughter of the escaped slave Margaret Garner, and to render her as a kind of haunting, or unanswered question about the past of slavery and the future of the American nation. Saro-Wiwa's use of Sozaboy in this novel can be considered in a comparable way. The text presents itself as the testament of an utterly obscure figure who, like *Beloved*, soon lacks even the dignity of a name. Like *Beloved*, too, at the conclusion of the text Sozaboy is disturbingly recast by Saro-Wiwa as a revenant, or figure of the undead in need of proper burial. Just as Morrison does with her spectral *Beloved*, Saro-Wiwa leaves us with the sense of Sozaboy as a form on the boundary between presence and absence, life and death, familiarity and alterity.

The most fascinating scene of the novel becomes, in this reading, its final one, in which we learn through Sozaboy's eyes and ears that he has become a figure of fear in the collective imagination. That his return to the people he once knew is no longer as a man, but as a haunting. That he has already died, not once but many times. That if he started out as a fighter for the community's future, he has ended as a pestilence. As the narrative draws to a close, we see the narrator stumbling from place to place, knocking on closed, locked doors and calling the name of

Sozaboy. If this is considered, then, as Ken Saro-Wiwa's final figuration of the struggle for Biafran nationhood, it seems to me to be an extraordinarily disturbing portrayal: a young fighter, killed over and over, but buried in too shallow a grave to slide peacefully into history.

In his account of the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Nigerian Military Government in 1995, Wole Soyinka reports that, after enduring three bungled attempts by his executioners to work the scaffold, Saro-Wiwa cried out: "Why are you people doing this to me? What sort of a nation is this?" (Soyinka 149). In the context of the three examples of Nigerian Civil War writing we have briefly explored here, it is already clear that Saro-Wiwa's last question might draw a variety of different responses. In both Emecheta's text and his own, we certainly see a refusal to mutely accept the arbitrary and pragmatic construction of nation state that was Nigeria's legacy from British colonialism. Instead in both texts there is a vigorous deployment of the resources of the novel, not to affirm, but to disturb the hegemony of Nigerian nationalism as the only fit expression of self-determination. As much as Ojukwu's *Ahiara Declaration*, perhaps, the most important effect of each of these novels, as texts of their time, is to disallow the problematic of "Nigeria" from being packaged in too easy and convenient a form. As civil war narratives they bear continuing witness to the cost of casual colonial writings of the nation.

Note

- 1 In a footnote to *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson reads the January 1966 coup as a national project implemented across ethnic lines by a professional officer class, according to the Prussian model of military organization taught at Sandhurst. Anderson attributes the widespread mis-recognition of the coup as an Ibo plot as evidence of how "thinly spread" Nigerian nationalism remained in the 1960s.

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