

“Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture”:  
An Ethos of Human Rights and the  
Possibilities of Form in Chris Abani’s  
*Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail*


Alexandra Schultheis Moore and  
Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg

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**Abstract:** This essay intervenes in current debates over human rights-oriented approaches to literature through a reading of Chris Abani’s two novellas. As opposed to critics who want to either embrace or unmask human rights in literature, we argue that Abani mediates between these two poles through close attention to the ways in which literary form and aesthetic can craft a shared ethos between reader and text. In depicting the short lives of a child soldier and sex trafficked young girl, he emphasizes the limits of the law: the gap between the human subject and the legal person whose legal claims are recognizable. At the same time, his narratives are not sentimental, and they challenge readers to extend a recognition of shared humanity across facile divides of right or wrong behavior. If, as Abani posits, we cannot become fully human without the courage to unmask ourselves, then the endeavor of human rights must also submit to a similar unmasking of its foundational paradoxes, limitations, pretensions, and complicities precisely in order to live into or embrace the fuller manifestation of justice toward which it gestures. More specifically, we examine the interplay of lyric and narrative voices within the context of the novellas to show how Abani deploys temporal and aesthetic constructions in response to the limits of normative human rights (legal instruments and official discourses). Rather than calling upon the reader’s responsibility and fostering literary humanitarianism (which has been extensively critiqued as paternalistic by scholars such as Joseph Slaughter

and Elizabeth Anker), Abani's delicate balance of lyric and narrative generates a more complicated ethos of reciprocity between the reader and the subjects whom the text calls into being as characters.

**Keywords:** Chris Abani, human rights, child soldiers, sex trafficking, literary humanitarianism, novella, lyric voice



This essay intervenes in current debates over the role of the aesthetic in human rights approaches to literature through a reading of Chris Abani's two novellas. As James Dawes notes, "the return of aesthetics as a category of interest in literary criticism has generated significant suspicion" ("Human Rights in Literary Studies" 399). In the context of human rights-oriented criticism, suspicion has often turned to condemnation of the aesthetic on the grounds that it not only aestheticizes suffering but, more pointedly, masks the structural imbalances that generate human rights violations, cultivates a sense of literary humanitarianism, and substitutes sympathy with the text for action in the world beyond it. These different critiques share a common root in the work of recognition: the argument that the aesthetic generates a readerly response through various forms of identification, perhaps layered through aesthetic pleasure, with the subjects suffering in the text. When the aesthetic produces concern in this way, and sympathy elides the distance between reader and subject, it contributes to what Makau Mutua calls a "messianic ethos" (231), Lilie Chouliaraki analyzes as "universal' morality and grand emotion" ("Post-humanitarianism" 107), and Joseph Slaughter (*Human Rights, Inc.*) and Elizabeth Anker each critique as literary humanitarianism that re-centers the ostensibly secure (read: Western) reader as the paradigmatic liberal subject and, thus, the true subject of human rights. Indeed, in *Spectacular Rhetorics*, Wendy Hesford warns explicitly against the "narcissism of pity" (Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* 209, qtd. in Hesford 48) as well as an ethos grounded in Enlightenment universalism. In place of pity and universalism, she argues for readings that demonstrate "an

awareness of the historical contingencies and rhetorical exigencies of ethical responsibility in its entanglement with institutional structures and individual lives” (190).

We share these scholars’ critiques of how the aesthetic may mask historical and geopolitical context and thereby reproduce, under the guise of universalism or (mis)identification, the exclusions and imbalances of the human rights regime more broadly, particularly its Eurocentric conceptual apparatus and the ways in which human rights can provide an alibi for political and military intervention. At the same time, we are wary of the ways in which the call to move beyond recognition can foreclose deeper analyses of how the aesthetic might function in human rights literary contexts. We turn to Abani’s novellas as overtly lyrical texts that probe the power of the aesthetic and, in doing so, help theorize the conditions of their own making. Rather than build complete worlds in which a reader might lose herself or full characters with whom she might identify, in *Song for Night* (2007) and *Becoming Abigail* (2006) Abani employs what we term an aesthetic of risk that foregrounds both the dangers and the potential of literary representations of violations. It is precisely through such aesthetics that he generates an ethos between reader and text that is grounded in the reciprocal conditions that underlie shared vulnerability and the capacity to harm rather than the politics of recognition. In using the term “ethos,” we refer not to Abani’s unilateral construction of a subject’s character, authority, or appeal, but to the relationship that emerges when the reader accepts Abani’s challenge to imagine at the limits of suffering, desire, beauty, and harm and, following Pierre Bourdieu, reflects on the institutional structures that frame those representations and readerly responses to them. Abani’s human rights ethos refuses to idealize either rights or the victims of human wrongs. Instead, he deploys recursive structures and the tension between lyric and narrative forms to illuminate the exclusion of normative human rights (legal instruments and official discourses) as well as expand the limits of the alternatives that readers might be willing to imagine. If human rights work is distinct from humanitarianism in recognizing the political agency of the subject, then Abani asks readers to think critically about whether they are willing to imagine that agency

for subjects who are far from the idealized victims found in conventional depictions of atrocity.

In “Ethics and Narrative: The Human and the Other,” Abani—poet, novelist, essayist, professor, and former political prisoner—writes:

Let us not begin with definitions. With academic references.  
With proof that many books have been studied on the subject.  
With the notion that for an idea to be singular, purposeful, or  
even useful it must be backed up by the research of others. Let  
us begin with a smaller gesture . . . a story, perhaps. (167)

The story that he begins, of learning to kill a goat in his rite of passage to manhood, reappears in the poem “Histories” from his recent collection, *Sanctificum*:

Boys are taught to kill early,  
Five  
when I shot a chick in my first ritual.  
Eight  
when chickens became easy.  
Ten  
when I killed a goat. I was made to stare  
into that goat’s eyes before pulling  
my knife across its throat.  
Amen.  
I thought it was to teach me the agony  
of the kill. Perhaps it was  
to inure me to blood.  
To think nothing of the jagged resistance of flesh,  
to make the smell of rust and metal and shit familiar.  
I have never killed a man, but  
I know how, I know I can,  
I know that if the timing were right I would.  
I am afraid that I might not feel sorry.  
I am afraid that I will enjoy it. (77)

The poem is set in a particular cultural context, although that context remains unnamed. Abani refuses romanticism; the act of killing in the poem is ignoble and the rationale provided by “ritual” soon falls away. By poem’s end, readers understand this killing as abject, made of the meeting of rust and blood and metal and shit. The poem thus exposes the danger that the act may transcend context and that the shift from cultural tradition—killing a chicken or a goat as a ceremonial sacrifice or rite of passage—to the murder of a man may be easy. In the beginning of the poem, killing is constructed as a technical skill, a matter of know-how, and, to some lesser extent, of moral courage, but as the object shifts from cultural expression to a murderous one, and from animal to man, killing becomes a matter of daring and even enjoyment. Notice the shift in verb tense in the last two lines, the uncertain “I am afraid that I might not feel sorry” replaced by the inexorable “I am afraid that I will enjoy it.” Notice, too, that the danger of this shift is a matter of “timing” rather than circumstance or anger-revenge-justice. What does temporality have to do with the ethics of killing? With the aesthetics of telling stories of violence and death?

In both the poem and the essay, as well as other public and literary expressions, Abani extends the threads of this small story, especially its play with temporality, to weave an expressive fabric from thematic fibers of family, language, belief, masculinity, war, shame, and acceptance of a shared responsibility for and complicity with violent acts of the past, present, and future. Quoting his school friend, a former child soldier in Nigeria whose “simple gestures” of covering the goat’s eyes and mouth allowed Abani to complete the sacrifice, he concludes that “[p]erhaps it is enough, as Emmanuel said, to know that it will always be hard” (“Ethics” 173). Killing and conscience come together in shifting contexts and destabilize the lines between duty and violation, local context and broader principles. Moreover, Abani couches the story within a larger meditation on what fiction and poetry require of both reader and writer, rendering Emmanuel’s statement an address to his readers as well as to himself. This gesture opens up the question of reciprocity for both: reciprocity refers to the mutual recognition of, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, the right to claim rights, as well as responsibility for violent

acts that we imagine, commit, and share. This brief example captures the ways in which Abani uses multiple genres and styles to move from specific contexts to larger meditations on what the aesthetic—those representational elements that call upon constellations of affect, desire, reason, and belief—can conjure from the reader.

Abani approaches these questions of reciprocity as the foundation for a shared ethos through a lyrical style and attention to interiority as a window into the structural inequities and political failures that underlie egregious human rights abuses. Wary of those who read stories of atrocity, suffering, and human rights abuses with sentimental compassion, he asks instead: “What if compassion, true compassion, requires not the *gift* to see the world as it is, but the *choice* to be open to seeing the world as it really is, or as it can be?” (“Ethics” 170; emphasis added). Abani expands on the idea of the writer as a person who possesses a rare ability to observe the world beyond the obscuring apparatuses of denial, privilege, or fear, an idea that Nadine Gordimer describes as writers’ “seventh sense of the imagination” (86). Abani extends that sense of deep recognition to readers and considers them full partners in the “honest conversation” that is his work (“Ethics” 169). This collaboration between writer and reader recasts a gift, over which one presumably has little control, as a choice, the measure of one’s will, or an expression of one’s reciprocity. As literature with what Stathis Gourgouris calls “a capacity to theorize the conditions of the world from which it emerges and to which it addresses itself” (2), the stories Abani tells in “Ethics and Narrative” (and refigures in poems of the same period, as well as in his short fiction) are personal and transcendent, attentive to both the limits and transformative possibilities of language and imagination, and always engage what Dawes terms the “ethical risks and possibilities of our language practices” (409).

We turn to Abani’s recent work to examine the ways in which literary forms, themselves most often the objects of theory’s gaze, may help us to theorize the very problems of human rights representation embedded in texts as well as the conditions which make both them and our own reading practices possible. For Abani, who continually probes what an ethos of human rights might encompass, these conditions are intrinsically bound to language, what he calls “some deeper human *syntax* we

can only guess at—that we value the lives of others precisely because we know the limits of our own” (Abani, “Resisting” 29–30; emphasis added). Grounding human rights not in individual dignity and autonomy, as described in the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and reconfirmed in subsequent legal instruments, but in the recognition of our shared capacity to harm and be harmed as a deep structural arrangement, or “ordering together,” to recall the classical Greek origins of “syntax,” calls for innovative strategies of literary representation that seek alternatives to the teleology of the triumphant protagonist or mourned victim. Abani offers a particularly rich oeuvre for exploring these strategies because of his range as a writer as well as his commitment to both texts’ and readers’ transformative potentials. As he told a TED audience in 2008, his

search is always to find ways to chronicle, to share and to document stories about people, just everyday people. Stories that offer transformation, that lean into transcendence, but that are never sentimental, that never look away from the darkest things about us. Because I really believe that we’re never more beautiful than when we’re most ugly. Because that’s really the moment we really know what we’re made of. (Abani, “Chris Abani: On Humanity”)

Much like his naming of the abjection of the kill in “Histories,” Abani’s discussion of the merging of beauty and ugliness locates power in and demands recognition of the ugly as an integral part of the human. His willingness to write at the limits of what readers might accept does not reconstitute a universal humanity based on abjection. Instead, it draws attention to the very structures that constitute a moral apparatus and challenges readers to reflect on their own moral positioning. These structures, in turn, include the law, and Abani clearly recognizes the limits of human rights in the space between the legal person who may claim them and the human subject in whom they ostensibly inhere. His work, as demonstrated below, is frequently poised in that gap.

A similar duality of embracing and unmasking human rights can be located in the global contexts that shape the production, circulation, and

consumption of literature that may be productively approached through the lens of human rights. These contexts frame what Paul Gready terms our “responsibility to the story” (170) even as they run the risk of fueling a humanitarian, readerly desire for noble and innocent suffering against which Abani in particular warns. In “Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self,” Abani exposes a hierarchy of exilic positions, with the “former political prisoner” (his own position) at its apex (“Resisting” 24). He asks: “How do the exiles in this situation navigate the romantic ideals placed on them and still maintain a degree of integrity? How does one keep being human while labouring under this imposed nobility? Is there a way to live that faces up to the horrors and displacement felt daily, yet resists the anomie of romance?” (24). The concept of “anomie” is an interesting one in this context; it is a social deregulation or state of normlessness that Abani links to the evacuation of the grotesque from our literary forms. Abani uses his own experience of torture to explore the profound dehumanization that accompanies the idea of the noble sufferer constructed by well meaning others. We add, following Mutua, that such constructions are often fueled by an imperializing and racist “metaphor of human rights” comprised of victims, savages, and saviors, and, as Teju Cole writes, that the constructions in turn fuel the “white-savior industrial complex.” While the stories Abani tells of his experience with such well meaning others lend them an air of patronizing innocence, he clarifies that this tendency to purify and ennoble the exile emerges from the natural human desire to mitigate the “predicament” of death at the heart of our state of being (“Resisting” 26). For Abani, the aesthetic, as a site where the power of beauty and ugliness can co-exist, provides one response to that predicament: “our relationship to the grotesque is as an aesthetic, a device even, to mediate death, as argued by Bakhtin. The loss of that aesthetic in our literature and culture forces us to seek it out: in the pain and suffering of others and in the subsequent ennoblement of the sufferer” (26). A return to the age-old function of literature as catharsis, perhaps, but with a twist: rather than dramatically enact situations that evoke pity and fear, Abani’s turn to the Bahktinian grotesque invites attention to the disavowed ugliness and even abjection that are part and parcel of the whole human. In other words, if we could



“vent” our need for the mediating influence of the grotesque, and if our literature could help us embrace the full range of human experience including that which has come to be known as ugly, then we could better transcend the constraints of romanticized constructions that, for all of their good will, may further dehumanize the already tortured.

For Abani, who embraces the grotesque in his unflinching portrayals of the beautiful and the ugly (and the beautiful *in* the ugly), the stakes of a “deeper human syntax” are revealed most richly in the complex enunciations of the lyric voice. Moving across different literary forms, conveying emotion and reflection yet resisting the impulse to romanticize, Abani’s lyric calls forth individual, singular experience as well as an ethos of the human that might undergird a shared human sense of something like ethics, even as his writing acknowledges the impossibility of manifesting any such thing—a fine parallel to the project of human rights, whose capacious principles become at once limited and effective only at the moment they are employed. When the lyric is combined with narrative, as in *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail*, which take up the issues of child soldiers and sex trafficking, respectively, the interplay of lyric and narrative allows for a complex reconsideration of the foundational terms through which human rights and its ethos might be reimagined in the compact between reader and writer. Additionally, the novellas reflect on the limitations of the normative human rights discourses that frame these violations by focusing on the spaces between the legal person who has standing before the law and those characters at the social margins whose lives are defined by their situational vulnerabilities.

### **I. Form and Ethics in *Song for Night***

*Song for Night* challenges classification with its subtitle: “A Novella by Chris Abani.” Something of a rare breed, the novella has been treated ambivalently by literary critics, who often find it to be less complex and sophisticated than a full novel and less condensed and tightly written than a short story. One way to think generically about *Song for Night* is as an incomplete *Bildungsroman*, a novel as violently truncated as the life of its protagonist, a child soldier whose spiritual quest is abruptly halted as he looks for a way to accept death. Of course, the text is also more

complex than that, because of the way that it combines lyric and narrative strategies such that it is rocked between their different temporalities. While he has written several full-length novels in addition to the two novellas, Abani is also known for his poetry, and *Song for Night* employs a poetic economy of language, image density, and deep structural interiority that raises questions about the trajectory and movement of the narrative itself.

The structure of the novel depends on what Heather Dubrow identifies as the common tendency for narrative to contain and be interrupted by lyric. *Song for Night's* fifteen-year old protagonist My Luck's movement forward through the bush and along the river to find members of his platoon after a landmine explodes is constructed in short lyrical bursts tied to sites that mark his route as a child soldier: battlefields, the settings of massacres, abandoned encampments, burned out villages, and spontaneous marketplaces. Chapters open with indications of time passing, although temporal distinctions grow dimmer as the novella progresses: "I wake up confused" (37); "[d]aylight comes like rust corroding night" (61); "I have not returned to the road, though I can see it winding around the hill" (163). Bits of My Luck's experience from before his initiation as a child soldier until his death are strung together like beads over the strand of the narrative and are discernible as lyrical meditations that also correspond to human rights forms: testimonial, witnessing, and confession. Taken together, the novella's parts read as a series of tone poems organized not around plot elements but around the complex system of signs used by the child soldiers to communicate with each other, since their vocal chords have been cut to keep them from screaming during their work sweeping for mines. These "chapter" titles—"Memory Is a Pattern Cut into an Arm"; "Dawn Is Two Hands Parting before a Face"—divide the narrative flow via a deliberate poetics, employing classical techniques of parallelism and chiasmus that heighten our attention to the lyrical elements within the prose. The titles also point to one manifestation of the "deeper human syntax" for which Abani searches in his exploration of the human, a language desperately inscribed on and expressed through the body after the voice has literally been cut off.

Abani's turn to embodied expression highlights the limits of the legal person as a coherent, bounded, ideally inviolable, and speaking subject that Anker analyzes so thoroughly in *Fictions of Dignity*. In place of the phenomenological turn that she explores as an alternative to the disembodied, speaking subject, Abani turns to lyric, as an interruption of narrative, to emphasize the need for multiple forms of expression and expressibility as well as to denaturalize the forms they take. As Dubrow observes, the differences between lyric and narrative have been painted with particularly broad strokes in much criticism: “Lyric is static and narrative committed to change, lyric is internalized whereas narrative evokes an externally realized situation, lyric attempts to impede the forward thrust of narrative” (254). Dubrow tries to address the reductiveness of such generalizations in her work on hybrid forms; however, the idea of the “forward thrust” of the narrative interrupted by the lyric's interior meditation and perpetual present-tense helps us to think about the hybrid form of *Song for Night* as particularly suited to the ethical subjects it calls into being, such as child soldiers, atrocities in times of war and peace, wasted lives, and premature deaths. Abani's narrative indeed moves forward on a very simple throughline: My Luck's search for his platoon and his home, the first lost to him when he was killed by a detonated landmine and the second when it was destroyed by ethnic violence. Yet this linear “thrust” is undone by My Luck's route through the jungle and the bush, which he chooses entirely for reasons he describes as connected to survival. The path uncannily reproduces his life's experience as a child soldier and thereby allows for lyrical meditation on scenes of atrocity after atrocity. That My Luck narrates from across the divide of life and death further undoes the narrative trajectory and ironizes his search.

The journey, then, recapitulates the circumference of My Luck's three years of service as a child soldier in a condensation of the classic flash of one's life before one's eyes, with a traumatic repetition and reworking of those unbearable events before the novel's abrupt end with his death. This uncanny emplotment offers one way to think about literary form theorizing the conditions for its own textual engagement with the ethical extremity of human rights violations, inasmuch as linearity is main-

tained and reworked as recursivity in a manner comparable, perhaps, to magic realism's simultaneous employment of the chronological epic and diachronic historical narrative to represent the excessive temporality of deep-rooted, intergenerational trauma. My Luck muses, "I am on the right track, this much is sure. It seems I am retracing my steps through places we passed. Something is off about it though, and as much as it is nagging me, I cannot pinpoint what it is exactly, but I know it has something to do with the chronology of my memories. The time between them is shrinking, I think" (Abani, *Song for Night* 56–7). Notice the conspicuous lack of conjunctions (and, but, still) between the first three sentences, each of which treats a different, perhaps incompatible, tempo, but none of which takes note of the possible contradiction of its relation to the others. Of course this "retracing" is characteristic of trauma and traumatic temporality: My Luck's movement through the jungle in a circle rather than a line, his periodic inability to proceed from a space or place for reasons beyond his control, and the triggers that recall his most painful memories suggest trauma in its most classical Freudian contours from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

The lyric quality of the narrative, however, distinguishes *Song for Night* from literary texts that innovate in a postmodern sense with temporality and spatial disorientation to signify trauma. As My Luck ruminates on the temporal structure of the journey—which is, in fact, the story—the narrative pauses, engaged in a kind of furious, site-specific meaning-making without, to borrow again from Dubrow, the "forward thrust" of plot development. James Phelan's theorization of the ethical implications of the lyric within narrative form is relevant:

The standard tense for lyric is the present. Lyricity, then, in contrast to narrativity, is neutral on the issue of change for the speaker—it may or may not occur—and invested less in character and event than in thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and specific situations. Furthermore, the dynamics of audience response stem from adopting the speaker's perspective without judging it. Thus, the double movement of lyric (that is, of what is represented and of the audience's response) is toward

fuller revelation of the speaker’s situation and perspective and toward deeper understanding of and participation in what is revealed. (635)

Lyric’s shift away from the “issue of change for the speaker” makes it particularly appropriate for *My Luck*, for whom character development and coming of age do not portend a rehabilitated, adult future. Phelan’s emphasis on the “fuller revelation of the speaker’s situation and perspective and . . . deeper understanding of and participation in what is revealed” reverberates with Abani’s own reflections on ethics and narrative, in which he acknowledges the generosity of readers’ sentiments of pity or compassion in response to his stories, while noting how such sentiments “obscure the deeper intent, the deeper possibility. The point,” he exhorts, “is to dissolve oneself into the journey of the protagonist, to face the most terrifying thing in narrative, the thing that has been at its heart since the earliest campfire and story. To dare ourselves to imagine, to conjure and then face all of our darkness and all of our light simultaneously” (“Ethics” 169). Abani’s assertion that the goal is “[t]o dare ourselves” indicates that when he speaks of readers “dissolving” into the text, he does not mean that their close identification with a character transports them into the world of the text. Rather, “dar[ing] ourselves” is being willing to make the choice, discussed above, to imagine differently and at the limits of what might be comfortable.

The lyrical meditations on each scene of violence *My Luck* revisits contain an aesthetic of risk—the simultaneity of darkness and light, goodness and ill, and beauty and ugliness that we theorize as part of Abani’s construction of a human rights ethos that challenges normative human rights discourses. Such images include the horror of a boy riding a cadaver downstream to get to dry land and the beauty of that same boy burying a skeleton despite “knowing it will be washed away in next year’s flood. . . . What is important is that this person be buried. Be mourned. Be remembered. Even for a minute” (Abani, *Song for Night* 77). Abani gestures to the responses to the violence of civil war that exceed the boundaries of the law: no claims are made, nor is justice possible. Instead, he writes of the necessity of journeying with the dead

and of mourning as a temporal construct. At the center of the book is the horror of a boy being forced to rape an old woman, a scene that perhaps most strongly conveys Abani's aesthetic of risk. Describing the rape, Abani writes that the woman's forgiving eyes gaze at My Luck "as if all she saw was a boy lost" (85). Her gaze seemingly redeems My Luck from his crime even as it shifts the reader's focus of concern from the victim to the protagonist (as opposed to perpetrator). The shift is refracted by the beauty of his girlfriend's recognition of the complexity of that degradation, as "she makes [him] sit by the water and she washes [his] face and [his] feet" (59). These descriptions generalize the scene from the specificity of My Luck's forced choice by his commander to "rape or die" (85) and his subsequent crime to the notion of how reciprocity might be constructed at such moments of extreme violence. In passages such as these, Abani dares the reader to imagine reciprocity in its largest sense: to recognize the humanity of both the perpetrator and the victim through the perpetrator's ability to harm, be harmed, and be loved. This depiction runs the risk of failure, of making readers turn from the text out of disgust. Reading this passage, we sometimes find ourselves unwilling to countenance the vision of the rapist as "a boy lost," particularly from the perspective of his victim. What brings us back to the text, however, is the thought of Abani's larger project, which includes his close attention to the conditions of vulnerability imposed by gender and sexuality throughout his fiction and poetry. Whether one desires to take up his challenge or turns away, however, one is faced with the critical problem of drawing a line between those for whom one would acknowledge reciprocity or deny it. Similar challenges ensue. The horror, beauty, and simultaneity of teenage love continue at the battle scene: "Whenever we raided a town or a village, while the others were raping the women and sometimes the men, Ijeoma and I made desperate love, crying as we came, but we did it to make sure that amongst all that horror, there was still love. That it wouldn't die here, in this place" (86). Perhaps the extent of the narrative movement in *Song for Night* is simply that My Luck also not die in "that place" of fear and horror, but rather finds some form of the acceptance of death that Abani identifies as the crucial function of the grotesque in literature.

*Song for Night's* refusal to engage with the “enlightenment,” “education,” or “rehabilitation” of its protagonist marks its divergence from the classic *Bildungsroman* as well as normative human rights discourses.<sup>1</sup> My Luck cannot be saved, rehabilitated, reintegrated into his community, or restored to childhood by either a humanitarian or the law.<sup>2</sup> His quest is eminently pragmatic, if ironically irrelevant: physically, to find his platoon, and spiritually, to find a way to accept death. Because of the nature of and context for the quest, the kind of education, enlightenment, and even full consciousness that might signify a completed journey is out of the question—in other words, the atrocities of war and their embodiment in the figure of the child soldier place both victim and perpetrator beyond recuperation or closure in classic narrative form. It is also worth noting that this is a *Bildungsroman* that is not one. That is, My Luck has never gotten up from the battlefield where a mine blast has destroyed him; his journey takes place only in the imaginative compact between author and reader. No matter, however—what is important is that we are willing to move haltingly with My Luck as he remembers the site of each battle, massacre, and atrocity he was forced or chose to undertake or commit, and once in the site, we remain there, alight within the lyricism of interior monologue and dense natural imagery, until the next visitation is announced.

Finally, it is not revelation but surrender that informs the abrupt ending of My Luck's story. In the penultimate scene, when he watches his platoon leave him behind once more as he struggles to join them on the other side of the Cross River, the chapter ends with the line: “I don't care anymore” (165). When My Luck finally arrives on the other side, he is able to find home and voice again as he drops his gun and bayonet and machete: “I am too tired, I can't do this anymore. If death is what awaits me, I want to face it without fear. I've had enough of that” (167). My Luck does not put down his weapons because of an epiphany about violence; nor does he accept death as a result of what he has learned from his journeying. His motivation is simple exhaustion.

Perhaps this surrender hearkens back to the unmasking that Abani theorizes literarily in the same way that he does when he tells the story of killing the goat. In that story, the protagonist/author fears that in spite

of his sorrow over killing a goat, he might enjoy killing a man. He identifies this self-exposure as a condition of both his writing and his ethic: the ability to call forth, expose, and embrace his own vulnerability and shame. We can find a similar exposure in the chapter in *Song for Night* entitled “A Question Is a Palm Turning Out from an Ear” which begins with a question that ties the individual (My Luck) to the historical (the Igbo in the unnamed civil war raging throughout the novella): “If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? . . . Who taught me to kill, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled only by an orgasm?” (143). Like the question, the answer holds the tragic doubled truth of the paradox: “I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me, and I will never be a man—not this way. I am some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing” (143). The corrosion of innocence, the ecstasy of cruelty, the intimacy of killing—and still the small gestures of tears, of the gift of food from a stranger on the road, of time taken to bury the dead. My Luck may describe the impossibility of becoming fully human in a world in which all human rights bets are off, but Abani insists upon the lyrical inscription of a destroyed character’s seeking as a foundational human ethos on which a culture of rights might begin to be staged.

And what of history, those specific traumas such as the Nigerian civil war that provide—or perhaps only hint at—the plot points of these novellas? Abani’s lyrical elements are open to charges of what Eleni Coundouriotis calls “*arrested historicization*,” or the double fault of at once divorcing human rights from historical context and, particularly in the case of child soldiers or “the victim-perpetrators par excellence,” of constructing “a metaphor of African childhood that is politically limiting as a characterization of the historical agency of the continent’s people” (192; emphasis in original). As Coundouriotis points out, “[t]he indeterminacy of time and place (these are Ibo characters, but there are references to Lexus cars so it cannot be Biafra in 1967) suggest the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness” (195). Rather than a sentimental abdication of historical responsibility as Coundouriotis suggests, however, we read such indeterminacy as a purposeful aspect of Abani’s aes-



thetic of risk, simultaneously an effect of trauma and the framing of a larger historical context encompassing multiple threats to a viable, shared national identity: British, American, and French colonial and neo-colonial influences as well as sectarian strife. What might appear to be contextual errors can also figure as clear signs that the author resists the distant reader's desire for the text to serve as a dependable guide to the Nigerian civil war. Perhaps most importantly, such historical indeterminacy may be read as part of Abani's way of asserting that the past *is* part of the present (shared) consciousness, and that this consciousness is surely necessary for the imagination of a common future. “What is most important . . . when writing, even in a historical moment,” Abani notes, paraphrasing Amitav Ghosh, “is not so much the particulars of that historical moment, but the texture of the characters' lives” (“Abigail”). This is not, we add, because history does not matter, but because the reader plunges into history from the narrative's scaffolding. From *Song for Night's* formal tensions and shifting temporalities that denote and exceed the Nigerian civil war, then, emerge My Luck's specificity as well as his invitation to readers to reach beyond immediate context to fathom a shared “notion of the core of becoming human” (Abani, “Chris Abani: The Truthdig Interview”).

## II. Haunting and Reciprocity in *Becoming Abigail*

If, as Slaughter, Lynn Hunt, Julie Stone Peters, and others argue, there is a link between the narrative trajectories of human rights law and the novel, particularly the *Bildungsroman*, then the precarious lives of those whom Kevin Bales terms “disposable people” present a literary and juridical narrative challenge. Slaughter is careful to show the limits of the mutually “enabling fictions” of law and literature. He demonstrates how human rights law often fails those who are most vulnerable to its violation precisely because they have not been recognized as that incorporated “person” required for legal and social standing and how stories crafted as *Bildungsromane* fail to represent the lives of people for whom the enlightenment, actualization, and recognition promised by that genre cannot materialize for the same reason. As compressed and truncated *Bildungsromane*, Abani's novellas make manifest the limitations

imposed on a child soldier, a sex trafficked teenager, and, by extension, others denied full recognition as human subjects by the necropolitics of their states or the appetites that devour lives in a global economy. Yet Abani does not ask his readers to mourn a loss of childhood innocence or lost chances for religious or economic redemption or rehabilitation. Such conclusions would ultimately reproduce the paradox of (non-) applicability that characterizes human rights law and literature and would depend upon the structural inequalities between a safe, feeling, beneficent reader and an ostensibly passive victim deserving of the reader's sentimental attachment or pity. Rather than burnish the ideal of "full personhood" found in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, herein denied by "the new disposability" (Bales 14) of subjects such as Abigail, a Nigerian teenager brought to London by her cousin for the purposes of coerced sex work, Abani imagines the process of her "becoming" in concert with her transcendent and therefore haunting qualities. Abani's portrayal suggests that at the core of reciprocity with others rests the deep capacity to be haunted by losses and betrayals: those we might commit, those we experience, and those committed and experienced by others. For Abigail, this entails her emergence from her mother's shadow—a shadow made darker and more sorrowful by her mother's death in childbirth, her betrayal by her extended family, and the failure of state policies to "protect" her as a trafficked orphan. Through lyric and narrative play, Abani invites readers to ask for what Phelan identifies as "participation in what is revealed" (635), although the tension in the book is not only between the lyric and narrative temporalities discussed above but also in the implicit spaces between the chapter headings of "Then" and "Now." As Jason Weaver writes, "[t]he intransitive word 'becoming' is key. The book is about the liminal state between things—the gap between girl and woman, male and female, past and present, Nigeria and England, the space where things are undefined, as with a trauma that is yet to be recognized." For Abani, issuing an invitation for the reader's participation in the "becoming" of the novel, and more particularly of Abigail, required an aesthetic of risk that would convey "the compassion for this voice, the words for this kind of tenderness, the courage for this kind of betrayal" (Abani, "Abigail").

Even in its reach toward the ineffable, *Becoming Abigail*, like *Song for Night*, partakes in the shared cultural work of approaching fiction through human rights in that the novella “can illuminate urgent questions about the relationships among representation, beauty, ethics, and politics” even as it resists re-instantiating a conventional human rights subject (Dawes, *That the World May Know* 190). Through literary allusion, formal borrowings from lyric and narrative traditions, Christian and Igbo symbolism, and close (if understated) attention to the complex legacies of British colonialism, Abani crafts a character who comes up against and thereby exposes the unmarked regulations of female sexuality within and across national borders. As Ashley Dawson notes, “by tracing its protagonist’s resistance to the forms of gendered subordination inherent in the family and in current frameworks of legal citizenship, *Becoming Abigail* represents the struggle for agency of those who are rendered human cargo. The novel thereby offers a tacit injunction for the transformation of belonging on both a symbolic and juridical level” (180–81).

What is the symbolic economy through which Abani issues this injunction? On one hand, Abigail may seem the quintessential, melodramatic “young and naïve innocent (assumed to be female) lured or deceived by evil traffickers (assumed to be usually male) into a life of horrifying sexual degradation from which escape is virtually impossible” (Doezema 4). This characterization of sex trafficking, argue some sex worker advocates, depends upon gendered norms of female passivity and chasteness versus male agency, ignores economic incentives for sex work, and demonizes clients and traffickers as opposed to police and the state forces aligned against immigration and sex work.<sup>3</sup> We have written elsewhere about the ways in which this important critique of conventional sex trafficking narratives nonetheless ignores the material suffering inherent in most trafficking transactions (Moore and Swanson Goldberg). Here we focus instead on how Abani avoids the competing narratives of the classic victim who needs saving and the (neoliberal) sex worker exercising her rights to migration, bounded autonomy, and rational control over her own body in order to map a much more ambiguous terrain. In place of the victim or the autonomous subject (who

is also recognizable as the conventional subject of human rights), Abani imagines characters who are difficult to place within conventional literary, humanitarian, or human rights terms. Their liminality is scripted on many levels: in questions of their temporal existence; autonomy (both novellas' protagonists are located on the threshold of adulthood and in contexts in which their autonomy is radically circumscribed); ethical responsibility for their capacities to love and harm; and embodiment (particularly as opposed to speech).

Abigail, like *My Luck*, refuses sentimentality and the seductions of her own innocence, and both characters literally inscribe experience and responsibility onto their bodies. In *Song for Night*, *My Luck* contemplates "the cemetery on [his] arm," the cuts he has made for each person he has killed, and says: "I . . . tell myself that if I put one foot into the darkness, it would disappear. I tell myself that this is only the shape of my guilt: guilt for all the lives I've lost or taken, guilt for letting my platoon down, guilt for losing my mother, for leaving her to die for me while I hid in the ceiling like a little coward" (Abani, *Song for Night* 152). The teenaged protagonist of *Becoming Abigail*, who also strives to become her own person in the wake of the unfathomable loss of her mother and namesake, maps her mother across her own body in cigarette burns that offer a "varied, different, telling" and later become the dots that mark her desire (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 33). As with *Song for Night's* chapter headings, these descriptions of the corporeal do not produce a phenomenology of sensations for the reader to share (Abani does not try to describe what the cigarette burns "feel like"); rather, the shared trope of violent self-inscription for those who (literally or figuratively) have no voice asks readers to attend to the possibility of stories that confound expectations. By revealing the ugly, shameful, abject, and unthinkable, each carefully contextualized in the specifics of the characters' marginal existences, Abani asks for an expansive reciprocity between reader and subject without the promise of a happy ending but with hope of a better future.

What could such reciprocity between Abani's reader and his subject look like in practice? How does this concept of reciprocity built into the novella's structure theorize the very conditions that the novella seeks

to represent? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “reciprocity” entered the modern lexicon in the 1700s, in part from Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797/199) in which he formulates the concept of a “categorical imperative,” cogently summarized by Paul Gordon Lauren as “a universal duty to protect the intrinsic worth of all individuals in order that human beings are never treated as means, but always as ends in themselves” (17). Kant’s contribution to the conceptualization of a universal imperative of modern human rights is worth citing because Abani presents us with characters whose humanity has been radically diminished in favor of their instrumentality for others. However, Abani adds to this definition the characters’ simultaneous capacity to harm themselves and others—to push at the limits, in other words, of the reciprocity that we as readers might wish to recognize. The challenge for both author and reader, then, is to imagine anew the emergent fullness of the subject precisely at the moment when we would rather turn away and without recourse to a coherent ideal. Abani’s work theorizes the paradoxical recognition of humanity in what appears to be most dehumanizing: not only the protagonist’s degradation and suffering at the hands of her trafficker, but also her crossing the boundaries of propriety in her affair with the older, married social worker assigned to her case and, perhaps most significantly, her self-mutilation and suicide. The revelation of the abject in Abigail’s story, and of her agency in some of the circumstances that produce that abjection, deters any sentimental, romanticized readings of her as a noble sufferer or object of pity.

Although Abani scripts Abigail’s vulnerabilities in familiar ways as a young, female Nigerian in London who has been sex trafficked without her consent on a false passport, he nonetheless avoids depicting the extreme degradations she experiences under her trafficker’s control in opposition to a safe and innocent childhood. Abani’s condemnation of sex trafficking is lodged not in its exceptionality, although he does not shy away from its brutalities, but in its relationships to other forms of gendered oppression. Abigail was eight when she recognized her father’s “patience . . . [and] longing” for her to become her mother (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 20), and “ten when her first, fifteen-year-old cousin

Edwin, swapped her cherry for a bag of sweets, . . . whisper[ing] softly[,] ‘I will kill you if you tell anyone’” (28). Abigail is twelve when Peter molests her at the reception following his marriage to her cousin Mary. At fourteen, she is pledged by her father to travel with Peter to London; the beating he gives his wife on Abigail’s first night there reveals a hint of the subjugation he will also demand of her.

Ironically, Abigail’s degradation as a human being makes her narrative transformation into a legal subject possible. Chained outside in the snow and mud, Abigail spends fifteen days as “a girl slowly becoming a dog” (92). On the night of her first “breaking in,” Abigail fights back against both the man Peter brings to break her through rape and Peter when he tries to punish her for her noncompliance. Her act of resistance, perhaps a newly gendered expression of Frantz Fanon’s humanizing violence, prompts her captor to make her into a dog: “And this is how she was made. Filth. Hunger. And drinking from the plate of rancid water. Bent forward like a dog. Arms behind her back. Kneeling. Into the mud. And the food. Tossed out leftovers” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 92). The reference to Abigail’s transformation from girl to dog is not without precedent in Abani’s oeuvre; indeed, the riskiest moments of the novella arguably emerge from his poetry collection *Dog Woman*, which was published in 2004 between the initial and final versions of Abigail. Inspired by Paula Rego’s paintings of women in “canine poses,” the poems, Abani muses, may be “[a]n exploration of the patriarchal attempts to contain women and the failure of that containment? . . . One poet’s journey into the dark haunting of his own masculinity?” (*Dog Woman* 11). It is difficult not to consider these lines in reference to Abigail as she is chained, raped, urinated upon, frozen, starved, and “[f]eeling for the brandings, for the limits of herself” in the backyard. For Rego, however, “[t]o be a dog woman is not necessarily to be downtrodden; that has very little to do with it. In these pictures, every woman’s a dog woman, not downtrodden but powerful” (Rego).

In the novella, Abigail’s transformation to a dog woman is at first simply a brutal creation of one subject by another in the global economy: “*this is how she was made*” (emphasis added). Soon, however, she takes advantage of the only resistance available to her as violated young

woman and as dog: “with her teeth [tearing] off Peter’s penis” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 95). Her resistance initiates the process of recognition before the law and into a new kind of legal personhood. The irony of Abigail’s “rescue” is that the protection provided comes in the form of incarceration; thus, she becomes a legal subject while lacking the most crucial marks of personhood: recognition, autonomy, and choice. Yet again, it is only when in protective custody that Abigail finally knows and chooses the object of her own desire: Derek, the married social worker assigned to her case. In standard moral and legal terms, her affair with him may be read as the criminal, immoral act of a man taking advantage of a minor who by definition cannot legally consent to sexual intercourse, a man further abusing the already profoundly abused, trafficked minor he was meant to protect and serve. That her affair with him is her choice is written on her body in the cigarette burns she makes after their first lovemaking. She instructs Derek: “This one is you, this, me. . . . Here . . . is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother’s. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don’t you see?” (53). The legal personhood she is finally granted as a ward of the state comes, then, at the expense of her own becoming (desire, self-expression, legibility to an other), as she finally claims “Abigail” for herself rather than hoping the echoes of her mother will resound through her.

This paradox forms the ethical crux of the novella, as the Abigail who deserves the protection and services of the state cannot be reconciled with the Abigail who “had been taken and taken and taken. And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had a choice in the matter, it was taken away” (117). The state’s betrayal of Abigail is complete when the social worker accompanying her to court for Derek’s sentencing vows: “Don’t you worry, sister, that monster is going away for a long time” (118). Abani rejects a false transnational sisterhood of female sexual innocence that, as the scene’s setting indicates, underpins ostensibly favorable yet ultimately paternalistic legal judgments. We follow Abani’s shift in focus from Abigail’s constitution as an autonomous subject of law and desire to the way her character conveys the need for a more expansive, shared human rights culture.

Abani has described how he “wanted a narrative where it would be hard to connect to it any emotional and in some ways conceptual framework that had not itself been generated by the narrative” (Abani, “Abigail”). In other words, Abani attempts to create a narrative that exceeds and rejects existing interpretive models and instead theorizes its own conditions of being. His approach, which depends on the text’s recursive narrative structure, or what one reviewer calls its “nightmare logic” (Lipsyte 11), rather than emotional identification, developed as he reworked Abigail’s story over the course of a decade. Abani cites his early short story, “Jazz Petals” (published in 1996 and based on a news story), as one antecedent to the novella. In the story, he imagines the coming into sexuality and coming out of the protagonist, Jasmine, who prefers Jazz in name and music and evinces the improvisational ways in which we each emerge into subjectivities recognizable to ourselves and those closest to us. “In retrospect,” Abani says about the two stories, “I now see mirrors: the scene in which Abigail comes out to her father, this time not sexually, but as a human being” (“Abigail”). To be sure, the tragedy of the character in her final form is the failure of those around her to recognize her as fully human, a failure that is posed as a challenge to the reader. Four years after publishing “Jazz Petals,” the “ghost” of this character, born from what Abani calls “ectoplasmic moments” or “avataric manifestations” (“Abigail”), returned in the short story “Becoming Abigail,” published in the collection *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain*. Here the outline of the final plot has been drawn, yet the story adheres more closely to melodramatic conventions. Some of the language and imagery of the sexual awakening in “Jazz Petals” is echoed in descriptions of Abigail’s desire for Derek: “Unfurling before his rain, her petals kissed his sun, winding-vine-hope” (Abani, “Becoming Abigail” 248). However, the polarization of romantic love with a gentle man and the brutality of sexual slavery ultimately yield a rather conventional character more in keeping with the British tradition of the hysterical woman on the banks of the Thames that Abani also cites as an influence (Abani, “An Interview”).

The novella, published in 2006, takes more risks with narrative structure and characterization. Chapter headings of “Then” and “Now” create



a narrative line that is continually undone by the attention to liminal spaces, times, and identities as well as Abani’s reach toward the ineffable. The binary temporality between then and now does not correspond to the process of becoming, as in the standard *Bildungsroman*, but rather, ultimately, to the work of haunting:

There’s a lot of playing with Christian symbolism. . . . As [Abigail] begins to gain agency over her body, the body begins to solidify, so the names become clearer. Her references to Igbo culture become clearer. Towards the end, the body, which was ephemeral before, is beginning to collect and solidify. And yet, just at the moment when it all comes together, it transcends into this ephemerality once more. (Abani, “An Interview”)

Abani regularly turns to this kind of religious symbolism to describe the transformation and transactions he intends his fiction to accomplish. In religion’s attempt to provide a form for one’s experience with the ineffable, he finds a language for witnessing as well as rituals that “hel[p] orchestrate these creative interventions” (Abani, “Painting”). Significantly, his turn to ritual is another indication of why his aesthetics are so pronounced—why, in other words, his fiction about atrocity displays a keen awareness of the dangers of aestheticizing violence and suffering and, notwithstanding those dangers, repeatedly draws attention to its aesthetic constructions. In devising his own creative rituals such as patterns of imagery, metaphor, and structure, Abani tries to capture and make visible that “deeper human syntax.” Abigail’s ephemerality, for example, much like the lyricism of his prose, may threaten to supersede or erase the corporeal horrors of her circumstances such that we lose the material human subject in a turn toward rights or an ethos of reciprocal human responsibility. More productively, we propose, that ephemerality may gesture toward the inadequacy of those categories of agency and identity, noted by child protective services, in which Abigail would become recognizable: “Mother died during childbirth. Child probably abused by successive male relatives” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 109).

In the process of bringing Abigail into being—from the news stories upon which her story is based, through her early manifestations

in “Jazz Petals” and the short story “Becoming Abigail,” until her final realization in the novella—Abani has shown how Abigail’s humanity cannot be captured by the strictures of the legal rights regime or the traditional literary narrative. Her beauty is linked with the ugliness of her self-mutilation as assertion of both grief and desire, her humanity with the moment she becomes a dog at the hands of her trafficker, the difficulty of countenancing her sexual desire, and the assertion of her life at the moment she chooses death. Abani’s work here and in *Song for Night* manifests the search for an ethos of reciprocity within a world cracking under the weight of its rights violations. The articulation of this search depends on, yet seeks to transcend, the context of specific violations: child soldiers, sex trafficking, organ trafficking, targeting civilians during civil war, and the suspension of civil and political rights. For Abani, such an ethos is necessarily embedded in culture, tradition, and interpersonal human exchange even in the midst of massive human rights abuses, yet must be accessible beyond those boundaries. It is made visible in the imaginative work of language and literatures. His vocal commitment to this ethos positions Abani as a writer who deconstructs the binary construction “embrace/unmask” often posited with regard to normative human rights, because in his representational work he is always unmasking and revealing the beautiful ugliness, nearly unbearable twoness or “both/and-ness” of human behavior (what he calls “the dialectic”), and the obviously compromised nature of human rights talk/policy/law (Abani, “Resisting” 22). Unmasking provides the catalyst for a wider embrace predicated not on idealized identities but on reciprocity in its fullest sense. Thus, his aesthetic of risk necessarily produces ethical ambiguity, because ambiguity and “approximation” “allo[w] everyone into the conversation” (Abani, “Painting”).

## Notes

- 1 In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Slaughter argues that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the classic *Bildungsroman* are mutually “enabling fictions” (4) that plot the idealized development of the human rights subject and protagonist, respectively, in parallel ways through categories such as education.

- 2 For an analysis of the relationship of contemporary Nigerian fiction of African child soldiers in relation to the Convention of the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, please see Schultheis’ “Global Specters.”
- 3 See Doezema’s *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*. See also Agustin, *Sex at the Margins*; Doezema and Kempadoo, *Global Sex Workers*; and Kempadoo et al., *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*.

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