

**Auto/Biographer, Historian, *Griot*:
Measures of Realism and the Writing of
History in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time***

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So he sat and waited like he had done most of his life, waited for the dark patches to make sense, for the jigsaw pieces to form a pattern. (Habila 359–60)

Narrating the relationship between the personal and the public has been the central impulse in African postcolonial fiction, with Chinua Achebe representing the first generation of writers from Nigeria who undertook the task of returning to history to work out the links between the two. Manifested most powerfully in Achebe's recovery and recording of the often-forgotten layers of the nation's past, this decolonizing impulse has continued to inspire the third generation of Anglophone writers from Nigeria, many of whom assume the task of evoking history through the representations of the trials and traumas of the nation emerging from the shadows of colonialism and neo-colonialism. What is perhaps most remarkable is the way in which Chidamanda Adichie and Helon Habila, two of the most remarkable new voices in this generation of writers, represent history in their novels: by altering the conventional frame through which history is portrayed in fiction, they have refigured, in markedly distinctive ways, the narrative forms that embody the domain of the personal and the public. Helon Habila, in particular, is concerned with the multiplicity of histories (and with historiography or the scripting of history as a mode of representing this multiplicity) rather than with a unitary mode through which a singular historical reality is excavated and signified in fiction. As a consequence, he works out a new trajectory for representing the private and the public in fiction, significantly modulating the dominant forms of realism inherited from the first generation African postcolonial writers.¹

Realism has been the standard form in which the interface of the private and the public has been represented in African fiction, possessing its own discursive history and genealogy. Two generations ago the relativist stance of Achebe's "village" novels disrupted the notion of a unitary historiographical mode underlying realism. In *Sozaboy* (1985), Ken Saro-Wiwa utilized a "vernacular" style, combining standard and pidgin English, to evoke a form of "realism" linked to the effort to tell the story of the nation from below. Habila's generation of writers has taken up the task of redefining African realism and its links to historiography in ways that are truly innovative. As a work dealing with rural Nigeria in the 1990s, Habila's *Measuring Time* is a novel that simultaneously identifies, and works through, the "measures" of realism by adopting a temporality that is linked directly to the problem of historiography. This element of time emerges in Habila's use of delay and postponement of meaning and is exemplified in the narrative through the reiterated idiom of "waiting." As a form of deferral, "waiting" both produces, and is produced as, a state within a temporal order that is subject to the uneven law of memory and memorializing. The form of narrative anticipation, hesitation and incompleteness that constitutes this state of "waiting," therefore, signifies both a form of action and the condition of suspended action, mirroring Habila's break with the forms of conventional "realism" in which time/space continuum is usually figured as continuous and as teleologically ordered. The distinctiveness of Habila's realism can also be mapped out at another level of fictional representation: breaking out of the tradition of historical synopticism, his fiction places the demands of realism against the "reality" effect of fictionalizing an African past in relation to the emerging present. He thereby identifies an uneven terrain that makes visible the interface of varying conditions of narrative authority that include location of narrative voice and presence and the often-tangled ideological demands placed on the fiction maker to grapple with, and write about, history. The present article identifies and explores the many facets of Habila's historiographical project in *Measuring Time* in order to better comprehend the larger discursive rims that establish the conditions of possibility for a new aesthetics of realism to emerge within the contemporary African novel.

After having witnessed his village, Keti, overrun by vicious religious riots, the biographer/historian protagonist of *Measuring Time* sits in his dead twin-brother's room, unsettled and baffled by the events unfolding in his life. As the unofficial historian of Keti, Mamo saw his twin brother LaMamo, who had served as an itinerant soldier in Africa's innumerable civil wars, return safely, only to be attacked and killed by a rioting mob in his own village. Mamo lingers in a state of stupor; he "sat and waited, like he had done most of his life, waited for the dark patches to make sense, for the jigsaw pieces to form a pattern" (Habila 359–60). This act of "waiting"—visible throughout the novel—is not so much an expression of what Hari Kunzru, in his review of the novel in *The New York Times*, has called "existential despair" and personal disillusionment as it is an embodiment of the central narrative epistemology of the novel, one that constitutes the novel's status as "autobiography" that simultaneously aims to be "history." Working out of this form of entanglement, *Measuring Time* registers a significantly different attitude towards the temporal than is found in conventional realism: as a work of fiction that deals with "measuring" time, the delay and postponement embodied in the act of "waiting" signify the narrative process of negotiating the margins placed by time between the private and the public. Ever fluid—because they materialize only in relation to narrative location and to conditions of knowing—they challenge those conventions of realism that provide a stable frame for representing history in fiction. As a representation of the "history" of Nigeria during the Abacha years of military dictatorship, and told in the form of the "autobiography" presented from the perspective of an intellectual, the novel both marks and slides through those boundaries, highlighting the uneven terrain in which realism operates in order to produce the seamlessness of history. In so doing, it also opens up, and re-defines, the subjective and ethical conditions under which the novelist undertakes the task of writing his world and about "history." In fact, the act of "waiting" serves as a key motif within the dynamics of realism traditionally adopted by African authors, indicating that the task of fictionalizing history is an open-ended and non-teleological one.²

Habila's interest in historiography is evidenced by his use of a narrative form in which the main character is also engaged in writing an autobiography. The idea of a singular authorial presence that informs this scripting is rehearsed in the most dramatic form in Mamo's own efforts to codify the open-ended drama put up by the ladies of the village to mark the anniversary of the community's conversion to Christianity. Converting an oral tradition to its written form means designating it as an object authored by Mamo: "I ... wrote the play," (Habila 41), an action that elicits this response from Zara: "'No. I have seen it before. It is from our history'" (Habila 42). The notion of source and authorship in creating the text is also linked to a specific history of "home" that is presented as being simultaneously spatial and temporal. Home designates a space of belonging linked simultaneously to the subject's past and to the present, and to the process of making and unmaking. As a place of belonging, Mamo's village is simultaneously the site of his most intimate relations and his sense of community and fellowship. It is also the site of a larger impersonal order that reveals the arbitrariness and brutality of a military state.³ The subjects whose lives form the warp and woof of this autobiography are themselves caught within this duality. As a result, the everyday events narrated in the novel are assembled not as a seamless continuum or as an unfolding of life governed by a singular *telos* of time and tradition, but within the folds of a double movement.

The logic of this double movement around which the form of the autobiography turns is clearly linked to the mode of a refashioned realism adopted in the novel. It points to the inherent limitation within the self-sustaining order of realism, one in which language offers a form of transparency that refers directly to the observable outside world. Habila's realism constantly points to the "reality effect"—to the often unpredictable conditions that determine narratorial perspective and authority, conditions that lead to a deferral or postponement of meaning, to sites where truth about the represented world is often rendered obscure and diffused. Narrative obscurity inevitably affects the way in which readers perceive a picture of the present and of novel's world. Captured most powerfully in Habila's evocation of the "dark patches," this obscurity takes the form of those impenetrable shadows that are cast by realism.

In fact, the “patches” that constitute Habila’s brand of realism are part of a pattern that can be seen clearly in the novels authored by Nigeria’s other third generation writers.⁴

Writing under the authority of the state regulated by the predatory logic of transnational capitalism, militarism and neo-imperialism, Nigerian writers from the third generation have, in their own ways, re-negotiated standard forms of realism to represent and understand the past and the present.⁵ Such re-negotiation has led to a symptomizing of history through a dramatic representation of various kinds of voices, voices that relate historical crisis to the narrator’s perceptions of the world and his/her ability to represent it.⁶ In fact, Helon Habila, as one of the most powerful presences in this emerging tradition, works out of a form of realism that operates through its inherent duality, and it is this open-ended form that differentiates him from the writers belonging to the first generation of African authors. Realized within the interstitial space of representation—between its transparency and its deferral—the dark spaces in Habila’s narrative embody a form of self-reflexivity that goes beyond being a simple “western” post-modern literary idiom or device. In fact, this self-reflexivity appears as a necessary strategy to break up the seeming transparency of conventional realism and its ties to linear time and historical synopticism. Furthermore, Habila revises the received conventions of realism by adopting a form of hybridity, a “remembering” that fuses paratextual elements of fiction with traditional forms of West African storytelling. In short, the self-reflexivity in *Measuring Time* is conditioned by an attitude toward memory, temporality and tradition that provides a new understanding of the historical demands of fiction-making at the current postcolonial moment. Extending the scope of the kind of historiography that was first inaugurated by Achebe’s “village” fiction, Habila also moves beyond post-modernist literary stylistics toward defining a new aesthetics of realism for the African novel.

In their novels, both Adichie and Habila introduce narrators who present their own life experiences with a high degree of self-understanding that is continuously modulated and transformed in direct relation to memory born out of the pressures of the social and political order they inhabit. Giles Foden’s review of *Measuring Time* in *The Guardian* notes:

Measuring Time is both a historical novel that “measures time” in the sense of comparing historical periods, and a psychological study of a man who must “measure up” to his brother and the critical demands of a society in crisis. Most importantly of all, however, it is a triumphant celebration of relativism. By the end, in spite of abounding tragedies, Mamo has discovered that the secret of survival lies not in individualism but in exactly the sort of oscillatory in-between-ness that his twinship exemplifies.

The reviewer’s observations clearly point to the fact that, in *Habila*, the task of the novelist as a recorder and archivist of the past—both personal and public—often conflicts with the effort to make the present yield the same kind of transparency as the recordable past, leading to an impasse Foden interprets as a “triumphant celebration of relativism.” One notices, in this assessment, how the term “relativism” is directly linked to the author’s personal attitude. What is missing is an acknowledgment of the powerful torque created by the self-reflexive turn in *Measuring Time*, one that reveals history to be dynamically constituted by its own contradictions. In fact, the self-reflexivity in *Habila*’s fiction mirrors the world responding to its own rapid and unpredictable transformations, and to this extent, *Habila*’s realism can be seen to move into a more complex and layered arena of mimesis than had regulated the domain of realism in African fiction.

In his first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, *Habila* had envisioned what Chielzona Eze has called a form of redeeming “transculturality” to serve as an antidote to the pessimism of African political life. Eze has also observed that, in *Waiting*, the “centrality of the protagonist’s location in [a] liminal site ... a space of in-betweeness,” signifies “a condition in which life becomes a series of negotiations between multiple subject positions” (101). *Measuring Time* offers a varying form of that vision: it calls for a realism that forgoes its conventional rigidity and totalizing grasp on the moment, and introduces a protagonist whose subjectivity moves erratically and fluidly in response to the unpredictability of African political life while struggling to maintain its centrality. “[I]t

was all about survival, about bending a little so as not to totally break” (Habila 382): these are Mamo’s words conveyed to the reader in the closing sections of the novel. The word “survival”—with its many connotations—remains intimately linked to the task of recording the past and the present and experiencing their deep contradictions, and of projecting an open-ended future of political life for the subject/citizen and community. In so doing, the novel maps the uneven itinerary of conventional realism, one that is constituted through the doubling, overlapping, and sometimes-contradictory perspectives of the autobiographer and the historian. These elements constitute the heart of the ethical and aesthetic considerations in the novel.

At the level of story, *Measuring Time* utilizes the difference between the twins for situating Mamo as the autobiographer/historian, one whose central presence in the novel is marked by the close association between character and key narrator. Such a mirroring effect is tagged to the constant ordering and re-ordering of the various roles/perspectives (historical and otherwise) of the auto/biographer, the historian/archivist, and the storyteller/*griot*—with the *griot* combining, in some ways, the multiple roles of official historian/storyteller, and perhaps even official biographer—producing a kind of realism that depends on a non-unitary narratorial authority. Mamo is the intellectual, the thinker who stays back in the village while his twin brother, LaMamo, the soldier and man of action escapes and experiences the world outside. While the contrast between the two twins as variants of one another, and two kinds of choice in relation to the postcolonial Nigeria of its formative years, *is* absolutely central, the boundaries between them cross over in multiple ways.

The Mamo/ LaMamo duality suggests a dialectic that moves between “home” and “away”: Mamo himself may stay put, but he is imaginatively involved with his brother’s forays into an unpredictable world. At an early age Mamo’s twin traverses the vast African world beyond the village; in fact, his adventures represent a trans-African experience—of postcolonial strife, of recurring civil wars, and other neo-imperial struggles enacted across the vast African continent—in Chad, Libya, Liberia, and Guinea—all figured under the dark shadow of postcolonial

modernity. Mamo, who also wants to escape the circumscribed setting of his own village, is unfortunately prevented from doing so by an attack of sickle-cell anemia, an inherited disease of the blood that plagues him throughout his adult life. LaMamo travels to Africa's many new outposts, alternately engaged in fighting against, and with, insurgents on both sides of the conflicts that periodically erupt; he survives brutal attacks on his life; he falls in love—in short, he crosses boundaries that seem only too fantastic to his twin who waits at home. Mamo's waiting at home, on the other hand, allows him to observe his own world closely and to participate in the local struggles with a kind of involved detachment that mirrors his own intellectual and class moorings. Throughout LaMamo's experiences animate Mamo's narrative with rare immediacy—and in this sense Mamo is imaginatively part of his brother's journeys, learning about the larger African world through the fighter's tales of conflict, suffering, escape, and survival. In more senses than one, LaMamo's narrative becomes part of the history that Mamo records, one that he subsequently sees unfolding in his own village as political violence takes over and disrupts its seeming stability.

Habila deftly reworks his relationship with the conventions of realism in different ways. Even when he adopts realism's strategies, he creates a distance or an alienating effect that highlights the complicity between linguistic power and narratorial authority. Mamo's access to LaMamo's world through his letters provides such an example: the letters, written with the raw realism of someone writing from the battlefield, become part of Mamo's voice in specific ways. Marked by forms of "linguistic deviation" (Lock 6) that are reminiscent of Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, the letters capture the lived experience of life on the frontier through the projection of a mimetically driven idiosyncratic voice. Woven into LaMamo's narrative is also a critique of war and militarism that is represented through his dialogues with others, for instance, with Professor Charles at the MSF camp, who tells LaMamo that "this war, any war, is one big marketplace" (Habilla 162). In contrast, Mamo's other voice as the narrator shows no signs of linguistic deviance, although like his brother, Mamo fights his own battles at home: the constant fight with his own sickness, and with his autocratic father, a successful business-

man who also believes in the “marketplace” and devises all kinds of projects for the “benefit” of the village in order to exploit his people and make money. Thus, Professor Charles’s words about the business of war find their echo in Mamo’s experience of Keti, a traditional African village caught in the throes of political crisis and violence.

Mamo’s own battles reveal the inescapable link between business and political power. His faithful portrait of his own father is produced from the point of view of a son/witness who stays at home, and in so far as his narrative abides by the norms of realism, it utilizes a standard voice, with appropriate inflections and modulations that obey conventional realism’s strictures. His narration periodically appears to follow the familiar logic of “psychological realism,” with its underlying structure of ethical choice and inner conflict that highlight the limits of the protagonist’s untested idealism, his abiding sense of inferiority dramatized in the disappointment and failure he experiences in his romance with Zara, and in his troubled relationship with his father. Accentuating Mamo’s struggle to serve the interests of the powerful while simultaneously retaining his moral integrity, this form of realism has its roots in the tradition of fiction writing that Habila inherits from his African predecessors, such as Achebe and Ngugi. The dramatization of personal moral conundrums is a staple in African postcolonial fiction which claims an ethical/political role for literature. The representation of political expediency and individual social aspirations in the story of Mamo’s struggle also reflects the state of a postcolonial economy dictated by the logic of “supply and demand” (Habila 89) whose devastating effects are manifested in the social and material life of many African villages like Keti. These threads of continuity and discontinuity, and of sameness and difference, allow the narrative of “twins” to acquire a more complex profile as the ironies facing Mamo’s personal choices—as well those confronted by postcolonial communities—become increasingly apparent to the reader.

It is Mamo’s choice to be a historian—and particularly, a teacher of history—that allows the novel to work out the boundaries that constitute the relationship between history and fiction. In fact, the element of choice brings out the ironies that go to the very heart of Habila’s task as fiction writer. We see that, unlike his brother the fighter, Mamo’s ideal-

ism materializes in his vocation as a history teacher. However, as soon as he casts himself in this role, Mamo sees his own project ruined by the arbitrary actions of the military state. Later in the novel, he takes up his official duties as a biographer of the present *mai*, only to gradually become part of a closed circle of self-seeking and arrogant bureaucrats, businessmen, local and national politicians, and cronies of the military state. In a sense, it is easy to see why Kunzru interprets these ironies as embodying a form of “existential despair,” which he also calls the “defining emotion of the West African novel” (Kunzru). A closer reading of *Habila*, however, suggests that this sense of hopelessness is not a simple emotion attributable to the author. If this “emotion” can be called “existential” at all, it needs to be seen primarily as a form of affect that is produced through the complex negotiation of fiction-writing with the imperatives of conventional realism and with its ability to produce a “pattern” that can be recognized as history. Above all, *Measuring Time* indicates—time and again—the brutal irony that lurks behind that pattern and the underlying ethical considerations that constitute the role of the historian/auto/biographer.⁷

Mamo casts himself an “unofficial” historian who seeks to uncover the true history of his community by becoming an “official” historian, eager and earnest in his purpose, but gradually ends up becoming a witness to, and a participant in, the corruption and abuse of power in his own village society. He undertakes his mission by being motivated by the investigative ideals of an historian: in order to achieve this purpose, he returns to the lives of the early missionaries and colonial British servicemen, scrupulously reads the archive of the past in order to excavate the unofficial stories that lurk behind the relics, and attempts to draw out the oral histories from the survivors of that past, both colonial and native African. Ironically, however, the more he is engaged in his historical task, the more he is drawn into the vortex of the present, where the clarity of his own understanding of the operations of power in his community grazes up against the diffused sense of his own place within its order. This duality is sustained even as the narrative proleptically hints at Mamo’s continuing obsession with writing biographies of individuals close to him—Lamang, his father; Zara, the woman he loves and

who leaves him to seek a life elsewhere; Uncle Haruna the man who returns from the Biafran war as a vagrant; LaMamo, his twin brother; and Mr. Graves, the man responsible for consolidating British rule in early twentieth-century colonial Nigeria (Habila 266-68). Projected as future ventures, these biographies, however, remain as fragments, their incompleteness indicating that Mamo's work as a historian/biographer has a life only in the undetermined future. Ironically, they also envision a future through which all history can be rendered possible. Thus, his over-spanning project of writing the lives of people he knows provides a fantastical frame for narrating an all-inclusive history, a history where ideally the subject of history coincides with its object and out of which the realist novel has traditionally striven to arrive at its projected finality. As the novel unfolds, we see that the project of writing history, undertaken by Mamo, demands an allegiance to another kind of realism, one that comes with the acknowledgement of the inherent duality that lies at its core.

The incompleteness of any autobiography stems from the narrator's self-reflexive stance where the triumph of self-knowledge often conflicts with the confusion and chaos of the present. More importantly, under this scheme, the possibility of having an omniscient narrator who reads and inscribes the lives of others, and thereby controls all of the possibilities of representing the world, diverges from the ability to place the narrator's own self-reflexivity within a seamlessly representable order. Punctuated by a phantasmal loneliness, the writer of the biography of others is often forced into seclusion, listening to the radio for the voices of others:

Twin, what are you doing, seated here all alone in the dark,
is something wrong?

"No," he replied. "I am just waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Nothing." He stood up and headed back to his room. "Just waiting, that's all." (Habila 141)

It has been argued that having emerged from within the larger discursive fold of the narrative of the nation, the classic postcolonial

African novel forged a special allegiance to realism. Writing about Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha notes that “Anderson’s view of the space and time of the modern nation” is embodied in “the narrative culture of the realist novel” (2). Bhabha further explains that this “narrative culture” identifies “the traditional authority of those objects of knowledge.... whose pedagogical value often relies on their representation as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity” (3). *Measuring Time* projects Mamo as the central consciousness of the novel and as the historian/biographer of his village narrating the life of the community—from the past to the present. Here, the realist mode seems fairly conventional in that it allows the narrator as historian to delineate life in the village in all of its specificity and hybridity, including the idiosyncrasies that attend a nation marked by a long colonial history. At the same time, it also reveals the dark realities that lie behind the celebratory image of rural Africa—those of a community lodged awkwardly within the space of modernity, divided by unequal wealth and access to resources, and totally vulnerable to the manipulations of the military state that, according to Jack Mapanje, had “copied only the brutality, corrupt practices and selfish individualism from [its] colonial masters” (xiv). Realism, therefore, challenges the “holistic concept” (Bhabha 3) of community and culture by evoking the violence of the contemporary world; however, the act of writing or scripting “history”—reiterated throughout the novel—highlights those aspects of the novel that point to questions of narratorial authority and authorship that conventional realism had failed to address in earlier forms of African fiction.

Writing about Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri, Andrew Armstrong has noted: “[They] see the work of the artist in an atmosphere of chaos as an irruption within the violence and chaos around—creating its own space of excoriation and exorcism” (176). Habila’s historiographical project, on the other hand, presents itself as a form of archaeology in which the recovery of a past involves the evocation of what the reviewer in *The Guardian* calls “citizenship memory” (Foden). This memory is itself not unitary. Mamo evokes the memory of his community’s past through his critical reading of the colonial archive—old letters, official and unofficial

documents, and books that he recovers from libraries and old houses. It is a form of memory that gathers all the resources—oral and literate—to reconstruct the idea of a public life defined by its origin and end. The itinerary of this memory, however, is often uneven since it unfolds in unpredictable ways, often to disclose “dark patches” within. All oral reports do not offer a simple and coherent picture, and contradictions remain between the idea of authenticity and irretrievable loss of origin. Witnesses are not always reliable nor are they always capable of remembering past details without blurring the details. As a form of memorializing, the narrative about “history-making” calls for self-reflexivity in which the status of the self is itself rendered problematic: the jagged edges of the “experiencing” self and of memory and the unreliability of the world of fact, are thus made visible, which *Measuring Time* registers time and again, in multiple ways.

Concerns about historical knowledge and its limits are embodied in the novel in the form of the “history lesson” that Mamo offers to his students. When one of his students responds to his questions about “defining” history by saying that “history is about the past,” Mamo counters by asserting “history is not only about the past but also *about the future*” (Habila 95). The status of that “future,” Mamo implies, is open to the logic of possibility. Being lodged in a continuum whose significance can only be realized in its incompleteness, it lacks the strict closure that conventional realism demands. Mamo constructs this idea of history as an ethical lesson in order to motivate his students to think beyond the past, and the novel itself represents this idea as an antidote to the realist assumptions about historical determinism. As Mamo explains, the future—the region of possibility that flows from the past—is an expanding space in which the viewer’s position within a vertical order—height—determines the limit of the horizon:

See the horizon, there over the hills? That is not the real horizon, there are a myriad other horizons, and you can see that when you climb the hill and stare into the vast open field beyond, and they only multiply as you approach them. That is the true meaning of history. (Habila 105)

Conventional realism here dictates a form of synoptic ocular power—born out of the power to occupy a higher ground than the scene to be studied. This is also the position of a certain fantasy intrinsic to this form of realism—that it can safely script history through its power of the synoptic gaze.

However, the notion of an ever-receding, but also expanding, sense of seeing assumes a hermeneutic that paradoxically presupposes, but also exceeds, the epistemology of “historical” realism, revealing its own *aporia* precisely when it asserts its totalizing gaze. It guarantees expanded vision but simultaneously extends and defers the horizon of understanding, becoming an ever-receding entity, eluding the very *telos* towards which it tends. Bhabha has provided a succinct understanding of this form of deferral:

If the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the ‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols...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. (13)

Through examples embodied in the “history lesson” that Mamo provides to his students, *Measuring Time* evokes the limits of conventional realism and challenges its desire to achieve a totalizing vision. Furthermore, the history lesson also points to an epistemic violence that is inherent to the desire to “see” and particularly to “see beyond.” The thoughtless brutality that informs this form of desire is dramatized powerfully in the early sections of the novel in the narration of the killing of the witch’s dog by the two twins. Living in a world that offered limited experiences, and driven by the desire to break out of a mundane life, the young Mamo collaborates with his twin brother to kill the lone dog that belongs to an alleged witch living in the village. The dog is rumored to have the power “see spirits and ghosts”—to see “things ... You know distant places, underwater people, and spirits” (Habla 27). In order to

achieve that magical power, the twins kill the dog, extract its rheum, and apply it to their own eyes. However, after the deed is accomplished, they find out that the rheum “had glued their eyes shut” (Habila 33), and subsequently infected their eyes, filling their young minds with dread and nightmarish visions of a dead dog hounding them from the bush. Thus, the novel renders with unusual power not only the narration of the children’s imaginative but thoughtlessly cruel act; it also depicts the symbolic means through which the innocent desire to “see beyond” can materialize in the worst form of brutality.

The novel’s challenge to conventional realism—and to the task of imposing a single vision—is also relevant to understanding the narrative formation of what Mamo calls “history” and “autobiography.” While the first and second generation African novelists had confidently adopted many of the literary and oral traditions of Africa to refashion the task of rethinking and remaking history, the third generation writers work out of a mode of hybridity that highlights the disjunctions and discontinuities within writing, realism and representation. Departing from a simple binary structure that situates “history” and “autobiography” in a linear and ordered dialectic, Habila’s brand of realism gains its power from an unstable and hybrid mode. Therefore, the writing of history and auto/biography that Mamo undertakes incorporates elements that depart from conventional realism. The first element is clearly evident in Mamo’s use of the figure of the famous Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, for assembling the “jigsaw pieces” of the biography of Uncle Haruna, the man who left the village in 1967 to fight in the Biafran War. The second aspect has to do with the link between the tradition of the West African storyteller, the *griot*, and Mamo’s status as the biographer who becomes the new lore-maker of the powerful *mai*.

As one critic has pointed out, the Biafran War has played a significant role in molding the postcolonial consciousness of many Nigerian writers, extending from Okigbo to Habila.⁸ Part of Nigeria’s memory of the pain of consolidating the nation in the postcolonial era, the Biafran War finds its place most explicitly in Mamo’s narrative through the story of Toma, the “One-leg” raconteur. In a mediated form, the history of the Biafran War is portrayed in the narrative as Mamo’s “game” (Habila

100)—of inventing/ inserting/ memorializing an important figure from Nigeria’s cultural memory—Christopher Okigbo. A “miraculous visitor” who returns to Ketu as a wild man, the half-mute Uncle Haruna is barely recognizable even by own family members. Clearly traumatized by the experience of the war, he initially remains mute and when he does respond, he does so erratically and enigmatically. Only once he refers to his friend “Chris” whom he claims he met on the front. Haruna’s story about “Chris” remains obscure till Mamo animates it:

And from here the game would take on a life of its own, using as fuel the most airy and adventitious references from real life. He remembered that his uncle had once, enigmatically, mentioned the name Chris. What if it was actually Christopher Okigbo he was referring to? What if they had really met at the front? And here the game would assume a cinematic/poetic license. (Habla 100)

Christopher Okigbo is a looming presence in Nigerian literature: as the first influential modernist poet writing in English who participated in the Biafran war, and killed, he is a forerunner of the ideal that Mamo himself aspires towards—the possibility of combining the best of the two worlds—the soldier and the poet. Okigbo thus represents an ideal expressed by Mamo when he tells Zara: “My fantasy is to have [LaMamo’s] body, with my mind, and then I’ll be the perfect person” (Habla 120). Mamo’s history demands the re-creation of a personal and discursive genealogy that promises to synthesize the world of fact, possibility and imagination, fuse the threads of a known past with a possible future in the face of death: in short, a genealogy woven into the very fantasy fabric of history that promises new hope and reconciles the duality that hounds him. It is worth remembering that the creation of this genealogy also represents the fantasy of reconciling the inherent tension between being the subject/author of history as well as its object.

That tension is nowhere more palpable than in Mamo’s “what if” narrative, in which Christopher Okigbo appears as a captain on the Biafran side who wanders through the surreal landscape of war with his enemy, Haruna, after a fiery explosion destroys the camp where he had been

held prisoner by the Biafrans (Habila 100–3). Mamo refers to this part of his narrative as “poetic license,” a deliberate strategy in which evoking Okigbo in the space of biography represents what Maik Nwosu has elsewhere called a “dialogic” move. Habila’s strategy differs from Nwosu’s contention about the use that “Okigbo” been put to within the “post-colonial market of memories” (Nwosu 70).⁹ In fact, Habila’s narrative demands a different dynamic of appropriation, one that is powerfully rendered at the end when the reader sees a war-weary Okigbo composing his poetic lines about loneliness and travel, a scene that unexpectedly cuts to the figure of Haruna returning to the village years later and being met by his nephew, Mamo, who thinks the decrepit man is a beggar and offers him a coin. Mamo’s “game” is thus born out of an encounter with the “other” who is also a projection of the self he had encountered in his own brother’s life, visible in the meeting of the two figures on the same landscape—the figure of young Mamo ill with sickle cell anemia, “bony and stooped around his shoulders” (Habila 103) and the abject figure of Uncle Haruna, the “wild man” ravaged by war. Such inter-locking narratives, that both meet and clash, play a singularly important role in re-defining the tasks of realism, and in working out the boundaries between autobiography and history.

I have stated earlier that in the tradition of Nigerian fiction inaugurated in the 1950s by Totuola, and subsequently fashioned by Achebe in the late 1950s and 1960s, by Saro-Wiwa in the 1990s, the third generation writers operate within a field where realism registers these marked continuities and discontinuities in narrative epistemology and style and is therefore haunted by a certain ghostliness. Even when this form of realism harnesses the power of African oral tradition, it moves towards a more eclectic form of the novel. At the heart of Mamo’s historiographical project is the presence of “tradition”—in particular, the West African tradition of evoking history by tracing royal genealogies through the creator and maker of music, magic and folklore—the *griot* (Belcher 2). Part of a romantic tradition that invoked the power of oral storytelling, the tradition of the *griot* ascribed a special role to the singer or lore maker. As Abiola Irele observes: “In oral literature, the text inheres in the physiology of the human frame, and is expressed as voice, in gestures,

and immediate performance” (10).¹⁰ The performativity inherent to the tradition of the *griot*, translated into the act of “writing” in Habila’s novel, introduces new inflexions in the narrator’s voice and status as a teller that become evident as the novel progresses.¹¹

When he is first offered the job as the historian of the *mai* and his predecessors, Mamo hesitates, claiming that all “he wanted was to write the story of ordinary people, farmers, workers, housewives,” but then proceeds to rationalize his decision by saying that “he’d consider the Mai’s story simply as part of a bigger project” (Habila 196). As the new lore-maker of the *mai* assigned to write what the Waziri, the *mai*’s advisor, calls “a royal history” (Habila 194), Mamo hopes to imitate the power of the traditional *griot*, celebrating his new-found power with unbounded enthusiasm:

He felt strong and unafraid, he had somehow outwitted his sickle-cell anemia... He felt like screaming out aloud, *I am alive and I am useful and everything will work out fine!* (Habila 196)

Examining personal papers and pictures from the colonial times, Mamo meticulously fills his notebook with notes about the history of the various forerunners of the present *mai*, tracing ways in which British colonial authorities intervened in order to control lineage and sovereignty. So far, Mamo’s efforts are directed at comprehending the complex history that had placed the *mai* in his current position of authority and also the relation between the position of the present Waziri and the *mai*. In preparation for the task that Mamo undertakes, he interviews the Drinkwater sisters, Kai and Malai, the surviving daughters of the Reverend Drinkwater, the author of *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti* and the man who had brought Christianity to the region. Mamo’s endeavour—to identify, excavate, investigate and “unmask” (Habila 333) the real story also sends him in pursuit of the crazy informer, Kopi. Eventually, however, all of his efforts are thwarted as Mamo becomes mired in the politics of the Palace that involves the Waziri, and before he can wake up to the machinations of power, he confronts a world of deep corruption, persistent deception, failed promises, and the threat of

public anger and discontent that eventually claims its victim—Mamo's own brother who had returned after years to his own village. At the end, the modern singer of the *griot*—the lore-maker who is also writing an autobiography that serves as history is left to shore up the ruins, confronting the true burden of realism and its promise.¹²

Habila's brand of realism—situated in the interstices of the past and the present, both stemming from the desire to know the past and yet leave the project of history as a process without closure—thus reanimates an oral tradition within a new context of performativity. The complex circuitry of narrative self-reflexivity—of narratorial subjectivity and historical consciousness, are brought out through this form of realism as it operates through its constitutive hybridity and heterogeneity. As an emerging writer of the third generation who undertakes the historical and auto/biographical project as a way to comprehend the life of a community and nation, Habila thus introduces a form of historiography based on teasing out and working on the possibilities offered by the interlinking of autobiography and/as history along lines that disrupt the naturalizing discourse of a national tradition that demands allegiance to a singular and synoptic historical vision. The “history lesson” that Mamo imparts in *Measuring Time* to his students thus becomes an embodiment of the political challenges and the epistemic possibilities—and their inherent limitations—for realizing the promise of writing the self into history.

Notes

- 1 Tutuola and Achebe belong to the first generation of writers writing in English in Nigeria, and so are Wole Soyinka, the playwright who began writing and directing plays in 1960, just two years after Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* appeared, and Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Bedekermo-Clark, Flora Nwapa, and T. M. Aluko. Ken Saro-Wiwa is regarded as the most prominent writer of the so-called “second” generation. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for helping me better comprehend the logic underlying the distinctions between the three generations of writers.
- 2 Schipper's position on realist literature is relevant to the discussion. Schipper states: “The author's belief that reality exists *in itself as an object of knowledge* and that it is possible to represent it “as it is” in literature—is to be called realistic and its product realistic literature” (emphasis added; 560). Also see, Oko 15–46.

- 3 General Sani Abacha was a Nigerian military leader and politician. As the *de facto* President of Nigeria from 1993 to 1998, Abacha took over power from the caretaker government of Chief Ernest Shonekan that had been put into place by General Ibrahim Babangida after his annulment of the 12 June 1993 elections. Accused of human rights abuses, especially after the hanging of Ogoni activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Auta tribunal, the Abacha government also charged the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka *in absentia* for treason.
- 4 Habila is perhaps the only writer from the generation that takes up the problematic of the historiographical in relation to narratorial reflexivity as the basis for writing fiction. Adichie, on the other hand, can be regarded as a chronicler of the private/public domain of history. As evident in *Half of A Yellow Sun*, her attempts to chart the troubled history of postcolonial Nigeria from the perspective of four individuals caught up in the Biafran War takes the form of telling the “story” of “history” by threading together four distinctive, but also intersecting, life stories.
- 5 In this context, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s fiction comes immediately to mind. See Lock 6–15. For a general discussion of social realism and its relationship with journalistic reportage in Africa, see Telilanyo 194–95. Also, see Schipper 559–75.
- 6 See Gakwandi 1–11.
- 7 In *The New York Times*, Feb 25, 2007, Kunzru notes “the defining emotion of the West African novel seems to be existential despair.” He also characterizes Habila’s style as “magic realist,” a term that appears to be currently used, in a somewhat indiscriminate manner, to refer to a whole range of African narratives.
- 8 See Woodroffe for an incisive discussion of the shaping influence of the Biafran war on Achebe and Okigbo. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is without doubt the most detailed contemporary fictional chronicle of the Biafran War.
- 9 In his important article, Nwuso claims that “the association of Christopher Okigbo’s poetry with Anglo-American modernist poetics has attracted two types of evaluation: the failure of ideology and Eurocentrism.” Nwuso is referring to the readings of Okigbo’s modernism that have unduly privileged the European model, clarifying that Okigbo’s poetry “troubles the historical overvaluation of the white [European] sign and the devaluation of the black sign manifest in the colonial market of memories.” See Nwuso, 70.
- 10 Irele argues that oral tradition is not be considered as a residual element of African culture retained in modern society, but one that is “fully contemporary—still being produced in various forms, updates in themes and references, integrating influences from the written convention” (8). What is significant about Irele’s discussion is that it places the discussion of orality right back to the question of “strategy”—a self-conscious pattern of what she calls “adaptation and appropriation” (8). See also Obiechina; Egudu 43–54.
- 11 The reviewer in *The Guardian* comments that “[what] is exciting about Habila is that he combines these western literary archetypes with a much older, oracular

style of African tale-telling in which the novel becomes part of the oral narrative tapestry of a particular community." See Foden.

- 12 The reviewer in the *London Times* fails to notice this aspect of the novel, asserting that the "storytelling" element about the novel stems from an "oral tradition," filled with "colourful characters" that are part of a "sensitive and realistic account of the tradition and lives of the Nigerian people." See Smith.

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