Life-writing as Political Critique: A Study of Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: a Reporter's Prison Notes* and Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror: a Journalist's Eye-witness Account of Nigeria in the Hands of Its Worst Tyrant*

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Introduction

A central argument in this article is how life-writing has a socially transformative force by staging individual and communal acts of resistance. I am concerned with prison memoir: a recollection of incidents leading to the arrest, detention, trial and imprisonment of the subject. I attempt to position prison memoir in the space between the individual sphere, where the subject negotiates itself in the prevailing personal struggle with institutional power, and the communal sphere where the subject bonds with others to understand and possibly alter power relations. A close reading of two prison memoirs will provide a textual basis for teasing out notions of life-writing as site of resistance, not only in how it dramatizes the courage and resilience of its subject as a political prisoner, but also in how it historicizes the collective struggle of a society to emancipate itself from the grips of military oppression. The two narratives are Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: a Reporter's Prison Notes* and Chris Anyanwu's *The Days of Terror: a Journalist's Eye-witness Account of Nigeria in the Hands of Its Worst Tyrant*. The historical background of these narratives is the regime of the late General Sani Abacha of Nigeria, during which dissident journalists, pro-democracy activists and writers were arrested, tried and imprisoned. The dissident journalists Ajibade and Anyanwu, both implicated in a coup to overthrow General Abacha, chose to tell their stories in their autobiographical accounts, but more importantly, they tell the story of resistance and democratic struggle in Nigeria. In this premise, their works illustrate the point that life-writing in a postcolonial society is an artistic rendition of a collective struggle against tyranny, which negates the idea of personal experience traditionally associated with autobiographical writing.

Prison writing has existed in Africa and Nigeria for as long as repressive regimes have existed (Dunton 113-125). Examples of prison memoirs in this tradition are Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Detained*, and Nawal el Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. Like the other prison memoirs, Ajibade's and Anyanwu's narratives demand a political reading that requires the reader to transcend the aesthetic landscape of the work in order to see

the social context in which the prison writer utilizes the act of writing to instigate his/her audience against oppression. My main objective is therefore to go beyond the personal experience of these dissident journalists and underscore the use of the prison memoir as a response to a social order characterized by human rights abuse and oppression. To that extent, I will present the general context of dissident journalism within which Ajibade and Anyanwu operated as journalists in Nigeria in the 1990s, and then proceed with a reading of their prison memoirs to make the point that writing them constituted in and of itself an act of individual and communal resistance. With different aesthetic moulds and strategies of representation, the journalists recollect prison incidents as indicative of the police state that was the Nigerian polity of the 1990s. Ajibade's and Anyanwu's narratives are part of an existing tradition of prison writing in which African social and cultural activists deploy the art of life-writing to, on behalf of the society, confront regimes of oppression.

Tyranny and Dissident Journalism in Nigeria

General Abacha's regime (1993-1998) marked the height of despotism, after more than thirty years of military rule in Nigeria. By the time he came into power, Nigeria had already been groaning under the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. Indeed, General Babangida's regime had the notoriety for brutally clamping down on journalists and media firms. As the scholar Ayobami Ojebode notes,

> [t]he events that led to the upswing of guerrilla journalism [in Nigeria] began in the early 1990s when it became clear that the military government of Ibrahim Babangida would not hand over power to civilians in 1990 as earlier promised. (21)

The regime frequently closed down and proscribed media firms. The killing of Dele Giwa, a founding editor of *Newswatch*, perhaps the most popular news magazine at the time, severely damaged Babangida's junta public image. Tough resistance mounted by the press from the Lagos axis pressured General Babangida to vacate power in 1993 (see Ojebode 19-40; Malaolu; Adeniyi 16-21).

General Abacha, a participant in previous coups and loyalist to past military leaders, inherited a power structure fortified by General Babangida's systematic moves. Still, tough resistance had built up as a result of the political impasse surrounding the events of 12 June 1993 when the presidential election results were annulled. The resistance was made up of guerrilla journalism, dissident fictive and non-fictive writings, pro-democracy activism, student activism, environmental activism (led by the late Ken Saro-Wiwa), and antagonism from foreign governments. Even though he came with the promise of conducting elections he, like his predecessor, appeared reluctant to

leave office. It soon became obvious that he was more interested in metamorphosing from a military head of state to a civilian president. When he eventually lifted the ban on political parties, they in turn unanimously declared him their presidential candidate. The country again erupted in violent pro-democracy demonstrations. Unlike General Babangida, General Abacha was not a man to be pressured out of power; he faced the harsh demonstrations with even harsher military strategies. This resulted in what many regarded as an extreme condition of oppression—indeed the worst maximum rule Nigeria has ever witnessed. In June 1998, General Abacha, who had clearly appeared invincible, died of what was officially ruled a heart attack.

The journalists were courageous in resisting power. "At *Tell* and *The News/Tempo*," Ojebode writes,

> guerrilla operations involved clandestine editorial meetings, printing at secret places and distributing copies secretly. The guerrilla journalists acknowledged tacit support and timely intelligence information from some of the agents of government. (23)

As dramatized in Ajibade's and Anyanwu's narratives there was the hope to outlive the dictator. Oluwaniran Malaolu, himself a journalist at the time, echoes their triumphal spirit when he writes:

> In spite of Abacha's unprecedented assaults on Nigerian journalists, he was unable to suppress them, just as the colonial authorities failed in their bid to cow Jackson through arbitrary and punitive laws. The press is generally regarded as the hero of Nigeria's current democratic efforts, which emerged May 29, 1999, following the demise of Abacha. (23)

The indefatigable press constituted a strong voice of resistance, not only consistently pursuing the aspirations of Nigerians for a democratic dispensation but also raising their consciousness to rise against the tyrant.

By reading Ajibade's and Anyanwu's narratives, part of my concern is to locate the contribution of the critical journalism practised by these news magazines, and others, in the larger sphere of the cultural struggle of the 1990s against the militarisation of the state. They were in prison until Abacha's sudden death; they came out of the prisons and told their stories in memoirs. I will first situate their prison narratives as a mode of postcolonial life-writing with far-reaching social implications. The implications range from *writing* out or exposing reprehensible vagaries of dictatorship (in the Soyinkan dictum of refusing to keep silent in the face of tyranny; see *The Man Died*), to locating their personal trauma in the larger social trauma of the nation, and to raising consciousness towards a resistant national psyche. One of my arguments is that their practice in critical journalism further sharpens their arrogance in confronting despotism. Their news magazines have been used to attack the military dictatorship and to call for democratic change. They have collaborated

with pro-democracy activists from other spheres of life (the music industry, academia, student unionism, the civil societies, etc) who have mounted increasing pressures on the military regime. Their immersion in the general struggle, and outcry for a democratic order, enables them to see themselves as endowed with messianic roles. It can be said of these prison writers, as Adewale Maja-Pearce says of Wole Soyinka, that it seems as though "destiny itself had called on [them] to lay down [their] pen … in order to engage the generals on the battlefield on behalf of a populace which never asked [them] to do so" (qtd in Bryce 37). I suggest that to fruitfully read their prison memoirs as a political critique of the Nigerian condition, one needs to see their arrogant self-worth as a strategy of undermining the powerful institutions of militarism that threaten them. It is also a way of inducting their audiences, which we can conjecture are primarily Nigerians, into thinking along with them that the best way to deal with despotism is to confront it, not to fear it, as they have done successfully. This is because, as they both imply in different ways, writing the prison memoirs is the ultimate act of surviving, outliving, or overcoming the dreaded dictatorship of General Abacha.

Life-Writing as Site of Resistance

Life-writing gained currency among English and American scholars after a struggle in the 1950s and 1960s to be recognized as literary narrative (comparable to the status of poetry, drama, and fiction) (see, for more on this, Marlene Kadar and Paul John Eakin). The dominant trend rests on what one might see as the singularity of the personhood behind the writing; indeed the name "auto/biography" becomes more fashionable, as the locus of analyzing such writing remains the subject of the story. Scholars of auto/biographical studies such as Georges Gusdorf, Georg Misch, William Spengemann, among others, variously talk of how auto/biography is about the being, the whole being, the complete being. In what is now regarded as the western or classical conception of auto/biography, the genre is said to offer an avenue for a being to draw together its different, conflicting aspects into one whole being.

This view of the centred subject, that a single human being remains the central subject of auto/biography, has been contested by feminist auto/biographical scholars. Leigh Gilmore in *Autobiographics: a Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* argues that "men [...] place the self at the center of the drama. Women, by contrast, have flexible ego boundaries, develop a view of the world characterized by relationships" (45), and by so doing represent "the self" in relation to other selves. This representation of self in relation to others is crucial to the conception of life-writing from the angle of postcolonial thought. That is to say, a theory of postcolonial auto/

biography or life-writing would prefer to see the writing subject not only speaking about herself/himself but also, and this is usually far more important, about the society, the fate of a collective. Perhaps one should understand first what Moore-Gilbert means when he says "[t]hroughout its history [...] postcolonial life-writing has sometimes advanced conceptions of personhood which are highly culturally specific" (xx). In Africa, for instance, a woman or man is defined in relation to her/his kinsmen, in relation to her/his personal spirits, and in relation to her/his environment.

A significant dimension to the decentered subjectivity of postcolonial life-writing is the opening up of vistas for resistant aesthetics. For Africa one can risk generalizing that the act of writing alone, whether imaginative writing or life-writing, embodies some form of resistance. Implicit in the decentered, heterogeneous nature of the subject of postcolonial life-writing is the notion of resistance spurred by the heteroglossic voices, subjectivities, and agencies collectivized in the author's life-writing. For as Andrea Mubi Brighenti, theorizing resistance, suggests, "[o]nly if the writer remains open to the presence and the voices that have crisscrossed and continually cross him or her can he or she become the true keeper of all acts of resistance" (75). The idea of letting in the voices of others, of locating the self in a socio-political and cultural context, of consciously rendering the peoplehood of a society is likely to anatomize resistance insofar as the writer's tendency to question norms is taken into consideration. To different degrees, *Jailed for Life* and *The Days of Terror* dramatize the notion of decentered subjectivity. With the frequent use of plural pronouns and collective nouns, the writers are keen to demonstrate that they are not only the ones who have suffered under the regime. As I will show, Anyanwu is more detailed in expanding the scope of victimhood, taking nationalistic and gender views of the prison experience with the hope of emphasizing the destructiveness of the Abacha regime.

Kunle Ajibade: "*[E]arn a chance to laugh last*"

By the time Ajibade leaves the news magazine *African Concord*, along with others led by Bayo Onanuga in protest against the instruction of the publisher, he has become fully aware of the battle journalism is to face under military despotism in Nigeria. He has in fact been in the battle, and has shown zeal in persisting in what he and others see as a precise line of protest journalism. The 13 April 1992 edition of *African Concord* (owned by the Concord Press of Nigeria Limited) has carried a story titled "Has IBB Given Up?" which has angered General Babangida. In response, the government bans the magazine. When, after entreaties, the General is willing to lift the ban, M. K. O. Abiola, the publisher, asks Onanuga, the editor of the magazine, to write an

apology letter to the government, owning up for "[demonstrating] professional misjudgement for publishing that story" (11). Instead of doing so, Onanuga resigns in protest, believing that journalists should not necessarily write stories to make leaders happy. With him are Ajibade and other colleagues, calling the bluff of their publisher. It is therefore with this sense of dissidence that Ajibade and his colleagues establish a company called Independent Communications Network Limited, publishing *TheNews*, a news magazine, and the dailies *TEMPO* and *AM News*. Besides their professional expertise, they rely on their courage driven by a dissident desire to rescue the nation from the tightening grip of the military junta.

The birth of *TheNews* in the period of anti-military pressures remains a compelling case study for understanding the psyche of Ajibade who finds himself in prison and eventually writes a prison memoir. This trajectory informs the aesthetic of resistance that shapes the tone and tenor of *Jailed for Life*. Ajibade is already a product of a society, of a critical journalism, that has become acutely aware of its struggle against dictatorship. Going into prison, for him, appears simply logical, especially as his ego is continuously shaped by the rather fruitful social struggle spreading across the nation. The struggle is wide-spread. As Oyeniyi Okuonye writes in "Writing Resistance" (64-85), the decades of military oppression in Nigeria saw concerted efforts against militarism. Writers, musicians, journalists, academics, and civil servants' unions all rose against regime perpetuation in diverse ways. *Jailed for Life* anchors its resistance in the dramatized courage and act of heroism of the author. *TheNews* faces a ban barely a year after its establishment. In Ajibade's words:

> We, who had spent a lot of money to make our office cosy, were forced to go underground to practice what is now popularly called *guerrilla journalism*. We were not going to allow the regime of Babangida to crush us. But it was set to be a fight between David and Goliath. (2)

This determination feeds into the social energy circulating in Nigeria at the time. There has been an ongoing discourse of struggle against military despotism because by now Nigerians are fed up with military rule; the clamour for a return to democracy has been raging, for which President Babangida has responded by offering a transitional programme. Ajibade and his colleagues are therefore asserting their will to dissent in a social context that is already charged with all sorts of dissident cultural acts.

To match their actions with their words and conviction, Ajibade and his colleagues have to devise survival strategies, knowing quite well they are dealing with a powerful oppressive institution. Taking risky actions and sometimes openly daring soldiers, these journalists, individually and collectively, embark on an odyssey that sees them coming through the most difficult phase of struggles for democracy in

Nigeria. With the Babangida dictatorship watching them, Ajibade and his colleagues devise very interesting strategies of survival, guerrilla-style. For instance, they have to open a new bank account "with a name different from the one known to the government" (*Jailed for Life* 3) for fear of having their account frozen. Unlike the expected kind of arrangement that they meet on ground where agents sell the papers before remitting money to the company, they have to convince some of their agents to pay *before* taking the products, as this enables them to have the badly needed cash ready in this season of anomie. To evade the oppressor, they have to persuade Gbenga Fagbami, friend of the company, to allow them to use his business centre as a place of production. In narrating the actions taken to escape the regime's secret and open hostilities, Ajibade injects doses of triumphalism to the extent that one might wonder at the arrogance of a journalist with the guts to confront despotism. For instance, Ajibade boasts of the news magazine having its secret offices close to Dodan Barracks, the seat of the military junta (6). Imperative as it is for them to use houses of their allies close to Dodan Barracks to do their business, it metaphorically suggests the bravery of the journalists in belittling the military generals as men in uniforms who are lacking in wisdom. This sense of arrogant triumph feeds into Brighenti's idea of resistance as a form of transformation; where power, rather than intimidating one, propels one towards a resistant action. In his words, "[r]esistance means transforming what is into what could be. It is a movement from being [...] towards 'potency'" (74). Ajibade and his colleagues do not only know the risk they are taking, but they also give the impression that they are ready to face any consequences. Their sense of resistance has achieved that potency where they believe they are smarter than the dictator.

And yet, as we will also see in Anyanwu's account, the Abacha dictatorship comes with tougher terrain for dissident journalism. Expectedly, the brave and courageous stance of the radical journalists faces harsher persecution, not only in the form of hostilities to the production and distribution climate, but also of pronounced threats to the lives of the journalists. The narrative of *Jailed for Life*, from the onset of the Abacha dictatorship, shifts from the recounting of the collective travails and triumphs (the pronoun "we" dominating) to the saga of an individual who faces a special military tribunal and life imprisonment. As the title implies, the book then centers on incidents leading to the detention and consequent imprisonment of Ajibade because of his role as editor of *TheNews*. However, through Ajibade's story, nuanced in the larger context of an oppressive climate for journalism, *Jailed for Life* captures the spirit of a generation, perhaps the only generation, of guerrilla journalism in Nigeria. It also captures a very decisive moment in the life of the nation during which concerted cultural struggle from diverse spheres of life culminated in

the expiration of military despotism. To this end, *Jailed for Life* demands a reading framework that activates in the reader a critical sense against oppressive establishments, but also sensitivity to what one might see as hyperbolic triumphalism. To construe the triumphalism as a negative device is to miss the psychological context in which the journalists, merely users of the pen, develop the courage to confront the heartless soldiers piloting the regime. It may be best to take Barbara Harlow's advice that to usefully read prison writing, we need to take the "activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption" (4). This is because prison writing, especially of the sort discussed here, is aesthetically moulded to instigate the reader to resist human rights abuse such as arbitrary detention and imprisonment.

Ajibade is arrested on 22 May 1995 over a story in *TheNews* titled "Not Guilty – Army Panel Clears Coup Suspects." Ajibade writes,

> The story had relied heavily on the preliminary report of the Special Investigation Panel (SIP) headed by Brigadier-General Felix Mujakperuo. In that report, the panel had said that all the officers who were initially brought before it as coup suspects were not guilty of the offence. But the Head of State thought differently. He was desperate to find the officers and civilians guilty and condemned, just to purge the country of political rivals and potential critics – a necessary first step towards dictatorship. (23)

Although Ajibade does not edit the story, as he claims, he reports at the security office. *TheNews* is still carrying his imprint as the editor (he is however heading an editorial team for the newly created daily *A.M. News*). His initial encounter with the men of the State Security Service (SSS) is friendly, and Ajibade finds his wits with which he displays a typical cynicism against the military dictator; dissident journalists, like literary writers, believe they are intellectually brave (after all, the pen, they say, is mightier than the sword) and seize every opportunity to hurl cynical, even abusive, remarks at institutional power. During an interrogation, for instance, Ajibade makes this remark: "Is the Head of State not a man like us? I understand he wakes up at 11.00 AM almost everyday [sic], goes to the office at 1.00 PM and leaves at 3.00 PM for the club to unwind" (*Jailed for Life* 30). Although Ajibade claims this is a "joke, actually," the interrogator is incensed and coldly retorts: "You're a foolish man. You're ill-mannered. The Head of State is old enough to be your father and should be treated with due respect. Even if you don't respect him, what of the office?" (30). Ajibade's second day at the SSS office comes with a harsher treatment, the first day having ended with a kind of friendship (in spite of Ajibade's cynical remarks) as the men of the SSS drop him off in town. This time he is taken to the Directorate of Military Intelligence, DMI. Here he faces more engaging interrogations and he argues with the men about the role of the press, freedom of expression, and tries in vain to convince them that he did not edit the story for which he is being held. The

summation of the charges against him is that he intentionally allows a false story about the coup to be published because he and his colleagues are being used by the detractors of the regime. Lieutenant-Colonel Olanipekun Majoyeogbe, one of the interrogators, tells him that "the recklessness in the media was because the so-called critical journalists were just willing tools of the politicians" (35).

What the interrogators do not know is that the deliberate use of insults constitutes a kind of weaponry that journalists, and other social activists, use against the dictators. Invectives are deliberately thrown at powerful institutions as a way of challenging their power. As recorded in their memoirs, Ajibade and Anyanwu take advantage of any slight opportunity during interrogations to voice unkind remarks about the institutions of oppression represented in the image of General Abacha. This anti-establishment hostility becomes an overwhelming tone of their narratives as figurative and non-figurative words and phrases are deployed to paint the dictator as a monster. This is a strategy that is common to prison writing. Janice Chernekoff refers to it as "the use of battle rhetoric" (49). On the one hand, it gives the writer the satisfaction that she/he is able to use her/his writing to get back at the jailer; on the other, it describes the degree of inhumanity exhibited by the oppressor and also an indication of the level of social anomie experienced by the state.

While there are occasions when Ajibade, in the hands of the military interrogators, and later in prison, expresses fears of his failing health, and of even losing his life, the narrative presents to us a journalist brave and daring. Ajibade continues to practice dissident journalism even while in prison. When Beko Ransome-Kuti, his fellow detainee, falls clinically ill, Ajibade smuggles a story which becomes a banner in *A. M. News*. While in prison, he "succeeded in getting two cover stories for *TheNews* as a result of the rich [secret] correspondence between [him and Colonel Lawal Gwadabe, also convicted in the coup saga]" (164). This, in the end, boosts his self-portrait as an activist-journalist that forges ahead even in the face of the most fearsome adversity. More important is the personal conviction and an enduring faith that although the dictator has all the physical and institutional powers, Ajibade's own power as a journalist predicated on a conscience that insists on struggling to save the nation from the grips of military oppression remains the point of his strength in the face of tyranny. To this end, *Jailed for Life* is laced with themes of courage, tenacity, persistence and perseverance. The will to resistance exhibited at the beginning of the narrative when Ajibade and his colleagues abandon *African Concord* and establish their own outfit is sustained throughout the book. While it is clear that the dramatized courage and heroism in the memoir can be interrogated, especially in terms of validity, feasibility and self-serving egoism, my concern is with how these attributes, in this memoir and Anyanwu's, are instrumentalized to

suggest the capacity of the pen to confront the gun in the context of Nigeria. The courage and heroism displayed by Ajibade here, and as we will also see in Anyanwu's narrative, are extra-personal, beyond the egoism of the writers. They are communal courage and heroism, made possible by general uprising against military oppression in Nigeria. The general uprising, in fact, gives rise to the individual experience presented in the memoirs.

With his determination all through the period of interrogation, torture, ill health, and maltreatment in prison, hope for freedom becomes a possibility. This hope is reinforced when Ajibade is eventually granted the right to receive messages, correspondence, and visitors at the Makurdi prison. "It was reassuring," Ajibade writes, "to receive a mass of letters and postcards every week from all over the world. Many of the warders began to treat me with more respect and affection when those letters began to arrive" (143). These are not only from family, friends and colleagues but also from bodies such as PEN International, Amnesty International, and other human rights bodies across the world. Each message comes with its refreshing dose of encouragement. His colleague, Onanuga, not only gives Ajibade encouragement, but also relays the resolve of his colleagues, and indeed the many guerrilla journalists working underground in Lagos at the time: "*We're struggling to keep afloat* [...]. *We'll continue to do our best to ensure that we all survive to write the story of this terrific time of our nation* [...]. *Don't let your spirit waiver*" (italics his, 143). Another colleague's admonition, Muyiwa Adekeye's, even looks into the future: "*Preserve yourself, it is crucial to earn a chance to laugh last*" (italics his, 145). This turns out to be prophetic as, on 8 July 1998, Ajibade wakes up to the pleasant news that the dictator General Abacha is dead.

The dictator's death is not only a triumph to Ajibade and other dissident journalists, writers, and pro-democracy activists incarcerated by the junta but also to the entire country. As Ajibade writes, the country erupts with joy at the news:

> We soon got to know that, at Abacha's death, the jubilant crowd that poured into our nation's unhappy streets was unprecedented in the annals of our history. The dances of joy in the homes of so many people went for a long time. Hilarious voices across the walls hurling enormous curses at Abacha in his grave. The time-honoured theme of good triumphing over evil became a constant refrain in the tongues of the artists, journalists and priests. The international community also heaved a deep sigh of relief. It was as if death had ceased to be the soul of tragedy itself. (173)

With the world heaving "a deep sigh of relief" as the death (considered in all quarters very sudden and strange, as General Abacha was never reported critically sick at any time) liberates Nigeria from the grip of the dictatorship, Ajibade in a short while regains his freedom.

Chris Anyanwu: "*I must tell my story*"

Having built an impressive profile as a TV journalist, a brief outing as a commissioner of information in her state of origin, Anyanwu decides to practise what she had studied in the United States: print journalism. Although, unlike Ajibade and others in the Lagos axis, Anyanwu had worked in the central government media house and held a vital public office, her idea of journalism is tilted towards critical journalism. She says of herself, "I am a true believer in journalism as an instrument of positive change" (2). As her narrative progresses, we get to know that what she calls "positive change" not only involves disseminating information but also probing public utterances and activities of leaders and public office holders, calling attention to the grave consequences of their actions, and nudging the citizenry to resist destructive powers. She makes it clear, in one of her column pieces, "[b]ut here again we find ourselves on that borderline where **the fear for selves must yield ground to our social responsibility**" (emphasis hers, lxi). Her deep conviction in this direction would see her resisting all forms of intimidation (some of them mischievously gendered) and building a wall of courage and perseverance around her throughout the traumatic experience.

Anyanwu is roped into the saga of the "phantom coup" because of the role her newsmagazine *TSM* (*The Sunday Magazine*) plays as an independent media outfit. Anyanwu's "adrenaline surged" (lv) upon hearing news of a coup to overthrow General Abacha, and the subsequent arrests of top military officers is related to her by her employee Jacob Ohioma. Immediately, she sends her reporters to get the story. As *TSM* is thrown into a frenzy of activities to produce a well-investigated cover-story on the coup, Anyanwu receives threats from different quarters. The nature of the threats is described by her, with these words:

> Mrs Anyanwu, let me get to the point. We hear you are about to publish something on the rumour of coup and that you have refused to listen to reason. Let me make it clear, if you love your children, don't publish the story. (lx)

But, for Anyanwu, the duty of publishing such stories is something near sacred, not to be suppressed by intimidations from unknown callers, and advice from friends and associates, some of them highly placed in the Abacha junta. She writes that "it was more important that the Nigerian people knew what was happening than that I obeyed a telephone command [...]." (lx). As it appears here, Anyanwu sacrifices her immediate family's security on the altar of nationalism, and this is precisely where the seed of her resistance is located. *The Days of Terror* at the outset, therefore, appears embodied with a vicarious

struggle of a woman for her nation and for all oppressed humans of her society. The courage and heroism of Anyanwu's memoir is therefore more impersonal than that of Ajibade's. Writing about women's life-writing from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the US, Chernekoff (38-58) contends that women tend to depersonalize themselves from their autobiographical accounts. She insists that women activists and writers "focus on politics, group achievements, and problems with male leadership" (39) more than their male counterparts. This may be contested from the point of view that, in Africa especially, men have always been the ones championing social activism but it is that very notion that Anyanwu appears to confront through the act of writing her prison memoir. One of the points she consistently implies in the narrative is that women too can be social activists, and their activism confronts a tougher terrain than that of men, in that the male-dominated society tries to systematically suppress women's voices just because they are women. This view is supported by Jane Bryce in her article "'Self-Writing' as History." With reference to the work of Soyinka, Bryce argues that the domination of the male voice in life-writing in Nigeria is a canonical creation, in that women's voices are systematically suppressed by not only the scholarship on life-writing, but also the hegemony in which male writers, such as Soyinka, position themselves at the center of social activism (37-60).

Expectedly, Anyanwu's daring attitude as a critical journalist is received as a rude affront by the Abacha family and the male-dominated powerful institutions. The dissension between Anyanwu and the Abachas is dramatized in the personal encounter between her and Abacha's first son Ibrahim. According to her, "[a] man connected in business with the Abacha sons arranged a meeting in my home with his first son, Ibrahim Abacha" (14). From the outset the meeting is marred by Ibrahim's rude accusation: "You are more pro-Abiola than Abiola himself [...]. What is your business with Abiola and NADECO? After all, you are a common **Igbo Girl**" (her emphasis, 14-15). Addressing Anyanwu as "a common Igbo girl" (notice how she emphasizes it in the narrative) is an indication of the crude powers and tactics of intimidation the Abacha family can display. This tactic is sustained throughout Anyanwu's interaction with all those who interject to force her retreat. They are all powerful men in the society who think that Anyanwu is taking a kind of risk that should be taken by men. The Abacha family, as presented in the memoir, comes to represent a powerful patriarchy, almost hyperbolically given a larger-than-life image of oppressor.

Anyanwu thus gives the impression that her punishment from the Nigerian state under Abacha is distinct because she is a female, or, to put it in a better way, she displays an overt sensitivity to the patriarchal structure of the Abacha oppressive machine. At the time Anyanwu

comes to the limelight, first as a reporter and presenter with the Nigerian Television Authority, then as a publisher of *TSM*, not many female journalists are on the scene. This is something she is fully conscious of. Not one to be confined to the female angle of things, and eager to prove she can do even better than her male counterparts, she takes on assignments considered masculine, even delving into virgin areas. For instance, she takes the oil and energy beat and travels frequently at a time when, in spite of Nigeria's oil wealth, the Nigerian people, she said "did not understand oil and the politics of oil. Oil business was then conducted as secret affairs [...]" (6). Anyanwu succeeds in demystifying oil politics for her viewers and earns the admiration of both viewers and politicians. To emphasize the gender dimension of her struggle, she writes a letter to her editors, stating:

> [i]n none of the other news houses have they shown as much brutality and daring as mine (they are more cautious with them). I'm informed it's because I have no 'strong man' behind me. But the question is: **is it not time society faced up to the reality that there will be a few women coming up without riding the apron-strings of powerful 'sugar-daddies' or wealthy husbands or bedmates**? (her emphasis, xxviii)

Her emphasis above is clear enough; gender bias underscores her suffering. Before her detention, while she struggles to make peace with the Abacha family, she encounters powerful people in government who openly wonder what she is doing in what they see as masculine journalism, journalism that centers on the reportage of serious political issues. One of them gives Anyanwu a copy of the magazine *Working Woman* and states, "[t]hey said I should tell you to leave politics alone for men. Write about love, sex, women's affairs and things like that just as in this magazine but leave politics for the men" (lix).

Anyanwu's conclusion, echoed throughout the narrative, therefore appears correct, namely that the "tone" of all the warnings to stop publishing anything concerning politics (especially the news of the coup) is "sexist" and she has "the distinct impression that they were bullying her because of her gender" (lx). As the case is with most activists, instead of succumbing to the bullying, she encourages herself, having seen an opportunity to inscribe herself on the pages of the ongoing history of unseating military dictatorship in Nigeria. In all the stages of her suffering under the Abacha regime, Anyanwu remains conscious of her femininity, although this is far from deterring her. Her narrative, more than Ajibade's, is buoyed by stories of other male and female detainees, for whom she expresses deep pity while having to cope with her own condition. She describes in great lengths the suffering of other men and women while in prison and how she is moved with pity to give help mostly in the form of cash (she gives money to her fellow detainees; she pays court fines of indigent prisoners to enable them to leave prison), but also in the form of soothing advice and encouragement. *The Days of Terror* has that

expansiveness of tale and analysis lacking in Ajibade's memoir. Chris Dunton (113-125) is of the opinion that Anyanwu must have carried out post-imprisonment research in order to make the memoir respond to the condition of oppression with which she is overly concerned. The evidence of research is strong and although some parts of the narrative are highly analytical, Anyanwu's analytical sense, as Dunton (113-125) also notes, appears weak and there is the tendency to sound emotional especially when analyzing the person of the late dictator Abacha.

Anyanwu's sense of victory, like Ajibade's, in the face of oppression appears to be her potent weapon against her oppressor; a sense of victory informs the cultural activism that resisted constituted powers in the 1990s. At every given opportunity, from her detention to her imprisonment, she expresses that sense of victory. In point of fact, her actions when the security men first come for her in her office demonstrate to them, to her workers as well, that she is a brave woman set to overcome Abacha's oppressive machinery. She has the opportunity to hide. According to her, she has already hidden herself:

> I left Beryl and Joan in my office, went into a small room along the corridor, shut the door. They passed the room and headed to my office, banging and smashing into doors, bullying staff they found along the way. I could not stand it. 'What if they kill one of my people?' I thought. I did not wait to consider the question. I came out, walked to them. 'Why do you have to create such a scene? Come let's go talk in my office.' (xxxii)

Emerging from hiding to present herself to the security men, she continues to hold her head high, going through different processes of molestation in their hands with some level of stoicism. When detained at a place called Security Group in Lagos before being sentenced and sent to prison, Anyanwu sees a piece of paper containing this warning pinned on the wall: "**What I do here, what I say here, when you leave, let it stay here**" (her emphasis, *The Days of Terror* 51). She is outraged by the content which implies that she is expected to shut her mouth after going through the horrible experience of being spirited away from her office and detained here. She barks at the notice, vowing she will live to tell the story of what happens to her there:

> I will tell the whole world what you did to me and to others. I will tell what you did to your kind, black men, Nigerians. I re-read it every day and I said NEVER everyday [sic] for the nearly four months I lived at Security Group. And I wrote my promise, my rebellion at the bottom of the tattered warning. NEVER in capital letters with an exclamation mark for emphasis. I hope it is still there. I hope it inspires others who would be victims of systematized tyranny as I have been. (*The Days of Terror* 52)

Her will to resist and sense of outrage against the tyrant Abacha (we can discern that he is the "you" of the quoted passage above), against the entire torture project, find such expressions throughout her narrative. Her insistence on writing in prison, against existing rules, paves the way for her self-expression as she successfully reads and

writes. At one point she achieves a victory: it is in Kaduna prison when Abacha's minister of internal justice Michael Agabamuche pays a visit. Prison authorities have reckoned that during the man's visit, Anyanwu should meet him because she is a well-known figure and appears to be in the best position to present the plight of the inmates. When it is time for Mr. Agbamuche to meet her, he gets closer to her, eyes her and "walked away, his majestic white flowing gown sweeping the filth along his path [...]. I was in sheer consternation. I could not believe he did that" (*The Days of Terror* 245). In a matter of days, Anyanwu, under a pen-name to hide her identity, writes a scathing piece on the incident. The piece sparks off public opprobrium against the minister. Anyanwu writes:

> it was published in *Tempo* magazine, posted on the internet and republished in South Africa. It was a moral victory for me. I felt stronger now and more ready if necessary to continue to fight back through whatever avenues open to me, especially through writing. (*The Days of Terror* 250)

It is in the same vein that writing *The Days of Terror* later comes through as another moral victory for Anyanwu. With words dripping with the worst virulence, Anyanwu describes the dictator Abacha, delving into his pleasure-driven personal life, his ritual-shrouded spiritual life, and his professional incompetence; she describes him as worse than Adolf Hitler. Against the backdrop of this terrible tyranny run by a man she sees as a monster, her surviving his brutality and living to write her narrative is, to put it in a larger context, the victory of freedom over totalitarianism, of the innocence of a woman over the "beast" in a tyrant.

There is a sense in which one might say Anyanwu's paranoia about the Abachas, rather than strengthen her projection of the oppressor-figure, undermines the principle of factuality underscoring autobiographical accounts, or the assumption that an autobiography should gravitate towards a factual account. But I hasten to add the argument that Anyanwu's prison memoir, like Ajibade's, does not necessarily adhere to the traditional conventions of autobiography in the sense of the writer having a pact with the reader on factuality and validity. Indeed, Anyanwu's memoir pushes the boundary by not restricting the narrative to her own experience (in spite of the paranoia with the Abachas), and by foregrounding the social trauma that the nation suffers as a result of military oppression. It is because of this kind of communal goal that makes some scholars of postcolonial life-writing insist on the notion of the decentered self, that in most cases the postcolonial subject in life-writing subsumes herself/himself in a larger frame that takes account of subjectivity as communal.

Conclusion

Ojebode affirms the victory of Nigerian dissident journalists over military despotism when he writes "to say that without the militant press, Nigeria would not have returned to democracy is to state the obvious" (24). *Jailed for Life* and *The Days of Terror* are testimonies of that victory. This sense of victory is a powerful device in life-writing by activists who confront dictatorships in postcolonial societies. It is what links the personal to the communal, as the writers attempt to feed the society with their personal acts of courage and heroism with the hope that they can encourage the society to rise against oppression. The two memoirs studied here clearly suggest that personal narratives have a crucial social dimension—locating personal trauma in the larger context of social trauma, as the trauma process plays out, and inclining the narrative of trauma towards resistance. Like the acts of producing and disseminating news in time of anomie, of practising critical journalism to dare the military dictator, the very act of writing their prison stories amounts to a form of resistance. Projecting their personal pains into the traumatic condition of Nigeria is itself strategic. Social or, better, communal trauma, unlike individual trauma where trauma can lead to fracture and alienation, can lead to a communal awakening; a sense of collective belonging. In Anyanwu's and Ajibade's prison stories, we see the stories of other dissident journalists, of dissident artistes, dissident writers and pro-democracy activists. Beyond that, we see the story of millions of Nigerians who took to the streets, for example on 12 June 1993, to demonstrate against the military junta, some of them beaten, maimed, and killed. The books exemplify how life-writing in Africa factors itself into the discourse formation that seeks to alter the conditions of life for good.

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