Postcolonial Text, Vol 5, No 3 (2009)

Three Children's Critical Perspectives on Aspects of the Contemporary East African Social 'Web of Relationships': Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*

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> If our God, the one we serve, is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace and from your power, O king, he will save us; and even if he does not, then you must know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the statue you have erected. (Daniel 3:17-18)
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> What is good has been explained to you ... to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)[1]

Introduction

The cover of Uwem Akpan's collection of short stories entitled *Say You're One of Them*[2] (2008) features a young black girl clad in a white dress running down a dirt road. Despite the clear skies shimmering in a soft purplish blue, the picture evokes a kind of melancholy that emanates from the girl's white dress. It is not an ordinary dress but a beautifully embellished one—a dress one might wear at one's first communion. What is more, the shadow stretching backwards and giving a distorted reflection of the girl further augments the picture's doom and horror. The reflection is distorted to such an extent that it leaves one wondering whether the girl's shadow is taking flight from the girl, trying to sever its ties from her, or actually chasing after her, desperately trying to overtake her. In this context, how is one to interpret the collection's title "Say You're One of Them" matching the innocent colour of the girl's white dress? Is it to be understood as a kind of command urging the reader to take a public stand? Or is it more of an invitation to imagine what it would be like to trade places with the girl on the cover and the children of the subsequent stories? Finally, how is one to understand the collection's two biblical epigraphs (quoted above) calling simultaneously for worldly resistance and godly obedience? This article will attempt to answer these questions by examining the portrayal of human misery and potential in Akpan's short stories located in the wider East African region, that is, Nairobi (Kenya), Bahminya (Ethiopia), and Kigali (Rwanda). In these stories, the norms of inter/intra-family and inter/intra-cultural communicative exchange are affected by the violent restructuring of

[1] Epigraph to Akpan's collection of short stories.
[2] Akpan's short story "My Parents' Bedroom" was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2007 and the collection *Say You're One of Them* won the Commonwealth Writers' Best First Book Prize for the Africa Region in 2009 and was subsequently feted by Oprah's Book Club.

the social "web of relationships" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 183); at the same time, this partially self-imposed passivity, which is largely predicated on the perception of oneself as victim, is transformed and manipulated to reclaim a sense of personal agency laying the foundation for a new form of "subjective in-between." The second part of the article focuses on the stories' East African regional setting and scrutinises its relevance from an international perspective. How does the West feature in these stories of social breakdown? What forms of social regeneration and reconciliation do the stories outline in order to break with what appears to be an endless circle of retributive violence?

A Children's Perspective as Facilitator of a New 'Subjective In-Between'

> The Romantics…seized upon the child as a symbol of all they believed in: nature, goodness, joy of living, human progress, instinct, and original innocence not original sin. Through their prose and their poetry, the Romantics created the Cult of Childhood. It has colored all our thinking about children today. (Greenleaf in Ratheiser 63)
>
> ...the worlds it [postcolonial children's literature] creates are, like childhood, evolutionary, celebratory, and inhabited by possibility. (Harper 50)

Childhood as a concept denoting a particular state in a person's development underwent a considerable shift in the course of the eighteenth century.[3] It was only in the Romantic Period that childhood began to be celebrated as a state of "original innocence" symbolising humanity's great potential for the future (Ratheiser 62-3). This understanding of childhood as an empty space, a kind of clean slate, has come to resemble the basis of dreams onto which we impose, plant and project out ideas of a desired future. This notion of hope is clearly reflected in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's declaration that "[c]hildren are the future of any society. If you want to know the future of a society look at the eyes of the children. If you want to maim the future of any society, you simply maim the children" (73). Elizabeth Goodenough *et al* render childhood in similarly utopian terms highlighting that "[a]s our sense of endangered nature on this shrinking planet becomes acute, children become the last frontier, embodiments of existence without bounds, of freedom, of possibility, purity, primitivism; they provide a perspective on the exotic, the unknown" (Ratheiser 80). But one should not perceive childhood simply as an "escapist strategy" assisting us in enduring a "growingly inhospitable environment" (Ratheiser 81-2) but rather as a conceptual framework that enables us to experience our surroundings differently and helps us break free from the mental and physical confines of the past and present. As McGillis makes clear, "children and their literature... always...stand...outside and in opposition to tradition and power...they do represent a challenge to the traditions of mainstream culture" ("Postcolonialism" 8). In this

[3] As Ratheiser points out, from antiquity to the Middle Ages "children were put in the same class as servants, devoid of civil rights and seen as property of their parents" (63).

sense, it is through the positive acknowledgment of the fact that the "foreigner is within us" (Xie 2), through the vindication of the child still lingering within ourselves, that children's literature—which Graeme Harper considers to be both "the literature of enfranchisement and [the] literature for the disenfranchised" (40)—can exercise its full powers and become a literature for the disenfranchised promoting (self-)enfranchisement.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that literary texts featuring a child's perspective offer a view of the world informed by the critical insight of an adult even if disguised in the clothes of a child's innocence and vulnerability. In this respect, the child protagonists inhabiting literary texts represent our dreams as adults, or what Bhekizizwe Peterson has referred to as "anxieties of adulthood," in that their blank slate allows us to question the justice of the present dispensation. But still, one wonders, as Susan Mann has rightly pointed out, if it is the vulnerability of children or rather their honesty that draws the reader into the text? Or to put it differently, is it our inherent urge to protect the defenceless or rather our avaricious appetite for plain-spoken social critique that entreats us to engage with the text? It is this clash of diametrically opposed motivations that highlights our fascination with child narratives: while giving rise to a desire to know and make known the unknown, they at the same time urge us to protect its mysterious and precious core from being spoiled by the hypocrisy and mendacity of everyday life. This motivation is perhaps even stronger when the perceived innocence and vulnerability of the child is damaged by what he or she sees and experiences. As one cannot "unsee" what one has seen, the trauma resulting from this experience brokers an even closer tie between the reader and the child protagonist, especially when the child narrator cannot make sense of what he or she sees and experiences. This powerful contradiction underlying our response to the text highlights what Susan Mann has termed "the subversive and brilliantly creative" capacity of child narratives or what I earlier referred to as literature's potential for (self)enfranchisement.[4]

This potential for (self)enfranchisement is predicated on a reappraisal of the activities underlying our "subjective in-between"—a process of revalorising forms of social interaction that is based on storytelling. As Hannah Arendt notes, "even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance" (*Human Condition* 50). The "narrative imaginary"—or what Arendt calls the "visiting imagination" (Jackson 140) inherent to storytelling—triggers "a succession of changing horizons, arduous digressions, and unsettling perspectives" (264) and thus allows for "an

[4] Susan Mann outlined these ideas in her the paper "Out of the Mouths: Voices of Children in South African Literature" delivered at the conference "Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel" hosted by the University of Vienna on 9 April 2010.

interplay of intersubjective *and* intrapsychic processes" (14-5) that assists us not only in changing our outlook on the future but also in becoming active agents in our respective societies.[5] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in a society perceived as a social "web of relationships" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 183) an "actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, [and thus] he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer" (190). As Michael Jackson avers,

> This oscillation between being an actor and being acted upon is felt in every human encounter, and intersubjective life involves an ongoing struggle to negotiate, reconcile, balance, or mediate these antithetical potentialities of being, such that no one person or group ever arrogates agency so completely and permanently to itself that another is reduced to the status of a mere thing, a cipher, an object, an anonymous creature of blind fate. (12-3)

The human faculty of forgiving is of paramount importance in this dialectic struggle of doing and suffering as it assists the remedying of wrongs inflicted on the self and other and thus disrupts the endless circle of retribution. As Arendt makes clear, forgiving "is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven" (*Human Condition* 241). Since only the experiences of others enable us to forgive ourselves our own misdeeds, a critical reappraisal and revalorisation of the 'subjective in-between' is central to the process of forgiving (see Arendt, *Human Condition* 243). In Uwem Akpan's short stories this process of forgiving is highlighted by "the transformation of naturally filiative into systematically affiliative relationships" (Said, "Secular Criticism" 20).[6] As will be shown later, the disruptive violence in the stories destroys a "subjective in-between" predicated on the strict control of filial bonds allowing for a move towards a more affiliative mode of social interaction. This move is reflected in the process of storytelling itself since it allows "one [to] move...beyond the self into what [Martin] Buber calls an essential-we relationship" (Jackson 59) that is no longer exclusively based on filial relations but now seeks support in affiliative allegiances. All in all, it is in thematising and highlighting the cracks and fissures in inter/intra-familial/generational and inter/intra-cultural communication that Uwem Akpan creates an opening that facilitates the formulation of new ideas and perspectives and allows for a reappraisal and

[5] As Arendt later summarises, "[b]eing seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear" (57).

[6] According to Said, a "filial relationship [is] held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority—involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict—[while] the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms—such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture" ("Secular Criticism" 20).

repositioning of this "essential-we relationship" underlying the subjective in-between.

Social Disruption in Uwem Akpan's East African Stories

> ...young people in fiction are often privileged interpreters of reality. Maybe it's the absence of an ideology—their decidedly direct, if not always innocent, take on things. Kids might not always see things clearly, but they do say clearly what it is they think they see. (Lakeland 28)

As outlined earlier, the book cover of Akpan's collection of short stories shows a young girl running down a dirt road. This depiction of seemingly-innocent childhood is contextualised in the subsequent stories as a hurried escape from an oppressive and in some cases life-threatening filiative relationship. While Jinga, the narrator of "An Ex-mas Feast," steals away from his street family hiding "among a group of retreating kids" (Akpan 29)[7], the Christian girl at the centre of "What Language is That?" after discovering a new language to communicate with her Muslim friend, asks her parents when they "were leaving for Addis" (152), and Monique, the narrator of "My Parents' Bedroom," after witnessing her father killing her mother shoulders her younger brother and walks into the night, "the wind spread[ing] black clouds like blankets across the sky" (289). In other words, what the child protagonists of the three stories have in common is that they become 'refugees' in their own countries. They experience a "sense of existential peril" (Jackson 33) that is commonly associated with the trauma of a forceful severing of former filiative ties. In this sense Akpan's stories outline what Michael Chapman has termed the "postindependence disillusionment" (3) experienced in many African countries after independence in the form of "traumas of dislocation and the search for a [new] home" (4).

"An Ex-mas Feast" centres on a street family in Nairobi whose survival depends on Maisha prostituting her twelve-year-old body and on the remaining children begging for money on street corners: "our real bait was Baby. We took turns pushing him in faces of passersby" (8). Contrary to many other *machokosh* (homeless) families, this particular family has managed to stay "together—at least until that Ex-mas season" (6)—largely due to their common dream for a better future represented by Maisha's mysterious "navy blue" trunk taking "up a good part of our living space" (6):

> The trunk was a big obstruction. It was the only piece of furniture we had with a solid and definite shape. Maisha had brought it home a year ago and always ordered us to leave the shack before she would open it. None of us knew what its secret contents were, except for a lingering perfume... Sometimes, when Maisha did not come back for a long time, our anxiety turned the trunk into an assurance of her return. (9)

[7] Page numbers hereafter refer to Uwem Akpan's three short stories in *Say You're One of Them* if not indicated otherwise.

But this dream that is to materialise and take a "solid and definite shape" in the form of Jinga's education (Jinga means "illiterate" in Swahili)—"You must know you are the hope of your family" (11)—turns into a 'big obstruction' when the wider implications of its fulfilment become apparent, as Maisha will have to sacrifice her life for this dream (Maisha means "life" in Swahili) and leave the family in order to do "full time [in a brothel] to pay [for Jinga's] school fees" (14). Upon realising that the fulfilment of the family's dream of a better future is centrally based on the destruction of the life it is supposed to make easier, Jinga is haunted by feelings of guilt: "Maybe if I had joined a street gang, Maisha would not have wanted to leave. I wouldn't have needed money for school fees, and perhaps there would have been peace between Maisha and my parents" (19). Fearing that Maisha's absence will only hasten the family's disintegration as his younger sister Naema has already decided to step into Maisha's shoes—"I'm big gal now, guy. Breadwinner. If you want school, I pay for you!" (28)—Jinga destroys the family's hopes for the future in a fit of anger:

> I sneaked inside and poured myself some fresh *kabire* and sniffed. I got my exercise book from the carton and ripped it into shreds. I brought my pen and pencil together and snapped them, the ink spurting into my palms like blue blood. I got out my only pair of trousers and two shirts and put them on, over my clothes.
>
> I avoided the uniform package. Sitting where the trunk had been, I wept. It was like a newly dug grave. I sniffed hastily, tilting the bottle up and down until the *kabire* came close to my nostrils. (28-9)

With Maisha leaving, the dream that provided a solid basis to the family's web of relationships dies and the absent trunk turns into a grave. It is thus that Jinga soon after, while his family is feasting on Maisha's Christmas gifts, hides "among a group of retreating kids and slip[s] away. I ran through traffic, scaled the road divider, and disappeared into Nairobi" (29). Realising that the family's future is based on strong filial bonds and patriarchal ideals that justify the callous exploitation of Maisha's body, Jinga cuts himself loose and seeks a new way of living based on affiliative relations as an 'independent' street kid. Rather than benefiting from Maisha's sexual exploitation he forfeits his privileges as eldest son and opts for the uncertain future of a daily struggle for survival on the streets of Nairobi.

In contrast to the Nairobi street family, the two Ethiopian girls that are at the centre of "What Language is That?" are members of the middle class. While the Muslim parents of Selam allow their daughter to eat pork—"my daddy said I could eat pork if I wanted" (145)—and scold the local imam for interfering in family affairs—"they had told the imam that he should not try to tell them how to raise their children in a free Ethiopia" (143), the Christian parents living across the street honour the "[o]pen-minded[ness]" (144) of their Muslim neighbours and thus allow their daughter to spend her free time with Selam. It is only when riots break out due to "faith differences" (149) and buildings are burned that the two families suddenly drift apart and the

parents forbid their daughters to have any further contact. The trauma resulting from this sudden disruption of the former subjective in-between is most movingly contextualised at the beginning of the story. Having grown up together, the two girls have become inseparable, two distinct bodies forming a whole: "Best Friend said she liked your little eyes and lean face and walk and the way you spoke your English. Her name was Selam. You said you liked her dimples and long legs and handwriting" (143). Just as speaking and writing resemble two forms of communication, long legs are commonly associated with beautiful walks as are smiling eyes with dimples. But in contrast to Jinga, who can only picture survival via escape, the incomprehensible, culturally imposed separation only increases the girls' awareness of the strong social bond that exists between them and results in them undermining their parents' authority. Stealing outside on the balcony they discover a new language, a language of mutual understanding that can do without the language of words their parents have used to such abusive ends:

> Slowly, Selam lifted her hand and waved to you as if the hand belonged to another person. You waved back slowly too. She opened her mouth slowly and mimed to you, and you mimed back, "I can't hear you." She waved with two hands, and you waved with two hands. She smiled at you. Her dimples were perfect, like dark cups in her cheeks. You opened your mouth and smiled, flashing all your teeth. "Hugzee, hugzee," you mimed to her. There was a puzzled look on her face. You embraced the wind with both hands and gave an imaginary friend a peck. She immediately hugged herself, blowing you a kiss. (151)

Breaking free from their parents' authority the two girls fight the enforced control of inter-cultural communication by taking repossession of their formerly disembodied hands, making them a tool for (re-)facilitating and nurturing a new subjective in-between based on speechless waving. While the children's way of making sense of the world was formerly exclusively filtered through their parents' eyes of filial obligations, the religious turmoil and violence compel them to question their parents' ideological beliefs and, albeit secretly, stand up for their own ideals represented by affiliative intercultural communication.

"My Parents' Bedroom," the last story in the collection, is set in Rwanda at the outset of the genocide in 1994 witnessing members of a family turning against each other in a hostile atmosphere that plays one ethnic group against the other. As Richard Holloway remarks, "[t]he human herd, when collectively aroused, is the most ferocious beast on the planet" (33). Akpan's story testifies to this account as the ambiguous bodily features of each family member become the basis for the violent action that subsequently ensues:

> My mother is a very beautiful Tutsi woman. She has high cheekbones, a narrow nose, a sweet mouth, slim fingers, big eyes, and a lean frame. Her skin is so light that you can see the blue veins on the back of her hands, as you can on the hands of Le Père Mertens, our parish priest, who's from Belgium. I look like Maman, and when I grow up I'll be as tall as she is. This is why Papa and all his Hutu people call me Shenge, which means "my little one" in Kinyarwanda.
>
> Papa looks like most Hutus, very black. He has a round face, a wide nose, and brown eyes. His lips are as full as a banana. He is a jolly, jolly man who can make you laugh till you cry. Jean [Monique's brother] looks like him. (266)

> The Wizard is Papa's father's brother. He is a pagan and he is very powerful. If he doesn't like you, he can put his spell on you, until you become useless—unless you're a strong Catholic. The color of his skin is milk with a little coffee. He never married because he says he hates his skin and doesn't want to pass it on. Sometimes he paints himself with charcoal, until the rain comes to wash away his blackness. (267)

> Without his ID, you'd never know that Tonton André is Papa's brother. He's a cross between Papa and Maman—as tall as Maman but not quite as dark as Papa. He's got a tiny beard. Tantine Annette is Maman's best friend. Though she's Tutsi, like Maman, she's as dark as Papa. Sometimes on the road, the police ask for her ID, to be sure of her roots. (268)

But despite growing up in a family whose members' bodily features encapsulate and undermine the country's fixation on ethnicity the child narrator's innocent but critical gaze has sensed Maman's permanent anxiety when going out with her in public. "She is always tense, as if a lion will leap out and eat us" (276). The reasons for Maman's anxiety became apparent when violence breaks out and the men take over control shattering Monique's belief in her family's former unity in resistance and its commitment to intercultural exchange.[8] Pressed to fulfil their filial obligation and to defend their ethnic group the men of the family participate in one of the most gruesome acts of human slaughter that is redolent of Hannah Arendt's depiction of totalitarian movements. As "atomized, isolated individuals" (Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 323) who have lost all concern for "normal social relationships" (317), the men fall victim to the "language of prophetic scientificality" (350) constitutive of fascist propaganda[9] and in a "mad fury" (Arendt, *On Violence* 21) strive to recreate themselves through "irrepressible violence" (12) turning former "dreams into nightmares for everybody" (21). As Monique vividly puts it, as soon as the mob "pushes into our home like floodwater… Our house smells...like an abattoir" (284). It is the translucent crucifix of the parlour representing the family's former devotion to affiliative social relations that remains the sole vestige of sanity in the midst of chaos. It therefore does not come as a surprise that once the private sphere of the family is invaded by the bloodthirsty mob Monique starts to "circle the parlor, like an ant whose hole has been blocked" (275). Her father in a final half-hearted act of resistance

> pulls his ID from his back pocket and considers the details with disgust. He gets Maman's card out of his pocket too. Joining the two together, he tears them into large pieces, then into tiny pieces, like confetti. He puts the craps on the table and goes back to his security post at the window. Then he comes back and gathers

[8] Like their Ethiopian counterparts, Monique's parents and relatives are well-educated and have had no qualms about defying local custom. As Monique points out, Tonton André and Tantine Annette openly "kiss in public like Belgians do on TV, and our people don't like this very much. But they don't care" (268). In a similar vein Monique's father went "against his people" by wedding "Maman in our church when [Monique] was born, even though she hadn't given him a son yet" (276).

[9] For further information on Arendt's notion of totalitarian propaganda constituting an ideologically-based "escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency," see *Origins of Totalitarianism* (351-2).

> them up, but he can't repair the damage. He puts the pieces into his pocket. (282-3)

Shortly after he nevertheless concedes victory to the mob and gives in to his pleading wife's demand—"My husband, be a man... My husband, you promised me" (285)—"land[ing his] machete on Maman's head" (285). But Monique only witnesses the unfolding action in bewilderment. Mirroring Maman's earlier disavowal of reality when Monique points to the evidence of the physical and sexual abuse inflicted on the mob's first visit—"I raise my nightie to show Maman my swollen thigh, but she slaps it down, saying, 'You'll get a new pair of underpants. Your face will be beautiful again'" (277)—Monique's mind takes refuge in the imaginary as she imagines seeing her mother rise again, "Papa's knife lifting from her hair" (286). It is through this escape into the unreal that Monique manages to safeguard her sanity against the violence of the real and reclaims a sense of personal agency. Thus in spite of the violent collapse of the family's former affiliative social web of relations and despite the rest of the world watching unmoved—as Jean "wanders toward the UN soldiers at the corner, their rifles shiny in the twilight" they seem to be "walking away from him, as if they were a mirage" (288)—Monique intrepidly holds on to the translucent crucifix, on to her family's former values, and resolves, "We want to live; we don't want to die. I must be strong" (289). In so doing she resists the dangerous, since self-perpetuating, temptation of seeking revenge based on exclusivist filial blood-relations, subconsciously hoping "that evil is no more than a private modus of the good, that good can come out of evil; that, in short, evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still-hidden good" (Arendt, *On Violence* 56) that will eventually give rise to a new and less violent form of the subjective in-between.[10]

The Regional Setting and the West in Akpan's East African Short Stories

> Whereas children are often seen in Western societies as a costly burden for families and for society as a whole, children in African societies are valued greatly. Attitudes toward fertility are beginning to change, but children are still seen as a blessing. To be childless is generally considered a tragedy; it is almost inconceivable for couples to choose to remain childless. (Stock 297)

On a continent where 42% of the total population in 2005 was 15 and younger (Cole and De Blij 130) Akpan's decision to tell his stories from a child's perspective is in itself a political act,[11] as it offers new

[10] As a person participating in the Rwandan genocide described the self-perpetuating nature of vindictive killings of innocent people, "the more we saw people die, the less we thought about their lives...and the more we got used to enjoying it" (Fischel 272).

[11] As Edward Said puts it, the role of the politically engaged intellectual and writer is one of "opposing and alleviating coercive domination, transforming the present by trying rationally and analytically to lift some of its burdens, situating the works of various literatures with reference to one another and to their historical modes of being" (*Culture and Imperialism* 319). In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* Said

critical insights to pressing social problems experienced by an age group which, albeit dominant in numbers, has remained largely unheard in contemporary politics. Akpan's three short stories' depiction of social upheaval and restructuring is clearly not only relevant to the wider East African region but of international concern. Importantly enough, the three stories are all set in urban centres, which credits Tom Odhiambo's claim that "[t]he urban space remains prominent in African popular fiction largely because it remains symbolically and in real terms the site where the nation-in-formation was [and still is] located—politically, economically, or culturally" (73).[12] In preferring the urban to the rural in their (re)negotiation and (re)formation of the subjective in-between, do these stories validate the assertion that the East African region—as Rushdie has claimed with respect to India—can nowadays be better "understood in terms of postmodernism rather than postcolonialism" (Ramraj 256)? How does this relate to McGillis's contention that the "global activities of such American corporations as Disney or McDonalds [are, if anything] examples of neocolonialism in action": a neocolonialism that on a materialist level causes a "more deeply economic and cultural" (xxiv) transformation than colonialism was ever capable of?

On a superficial level, the characters of Akpan's stories live up to the stereotypical expectations of Western audiences: while "An Ex-mas Feast" depicts glue-sniffing Kenyan street people living off children prostituting themselves to white tourists in order to earn money to pay for the eldest son's school fees,[13] "What Language is That?" features two Ethiopian families, one Christian and one Muslim, who after a time of close relations and peaceful intercultural exchange all of a sudden fall back into the trap of seeing the world exclusively through the eyes of religious fundamentalism,[14] and "My Parents' Bedroom" pictures well-educated Rwandan husbands taking delight in killing their wives in front of their children in an attempt to attain ethnic purity despite their own and their family's clearly trans-ethnic bodily features. On a deeper level, however, the families' breaking

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again avers that the intellectual's responsibility is one of "speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority" (127).

[12] This contention is substantiated by Cole and De Blij outlining the extraordinary growth of centres like Nairobi in the last 60 years: "The 1948 census put Nairobi's population at 118,976 and that of 1969 at 509,286. On average about 57,000 new people were added to Nairobi's population each year from 1969 to 2004. Its current growth is estimated at 8 to 10% per year, but since housing, jobs, industry, and basic social services are not growing enough to keep pace, shantytowns are expanding, and unemployment is rising" (490).

[13] As Robert Stock points out, "[t]o explain the phenomenon of street children, social scientists have pointed to the breakdown of traditional values and traditional family structures as part of the modernization process. Family crises are exacerbated by deep poverty, which makes it impossible for many parents to offer their children a secure home environment that meets even basic needs. Some researchers point a more disturbing picture of the home environments from which street children have come, claiming that many of these children have been the victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in dysfunctional families" (307).

[14] For a brief history of this religious conflict, see Cole and Blij (521-4).

apart is linked to ideas of a better life represented by images of the West that turn sour when they fail to materialise. Thus the idea of Premiership Football allowing for de-politicised trans-ethnic relations is discarded once religious violence breaks out in Ethiopia just as Monique's father openly vents his anger on objects representing the West—he "is cursing the toys, destroying the special treats that he and Maman bought for us when they visited America. He kicks the teddy bear against the wall and stamps on Tweety and Mickey Mouse" (275). Jinga in "An Ex-mas Feast" is most outspoken in his attack of dreams of the West represented by the "sweet smell of [Maisha's] Jaguar adventures" (25) escaping from his sister's trunk:

> …my anger was directed at the *musungu* men, for they were the visible faces of my sister's temptation. I wished I were as powerful as Naema's boyfriend or that I could recruit him. We could burn their Jaguar. We could tie them up and give them the beating of their lives and take away all their papers. We could strip those *musungu* naked, as I had seen Neama's friend do to someone who had hurt a member of his gang. Or we could at least kill and eat that monkey or just cut off his *mboro* so he could never fuck anybody's sister again. I removed my knife from my pocket and examined the blade carefully. The fact that it was very blunt and had dents did not worry me. I knew that if I stabbed with all my energy, I would draw blood. (19)

Despite this undeniable craving to seek violent redress for disappointed hopes of a better future, it is the children's "uncorrupted" gaze piercing through the thick layers of social custom and blinkered approaches to solving pressing problems that counteracts the senseless perpetuation of retributive violence. In other words, the children's unfaltering gaze cuts right down to the marrow and generates a kind of "positive anger" that—in contrast to blind aggression or frustration—allows us to perceive social problems in their complexity making it more difficult to subscribe to simplistic solutions, which more often than not only reproduce and prolong the injustice they seek to redress. This new vision facilitates the necessary move beyond the filial "economy of inclusion and exclusion" (Harrison 9) and resists the "binaries of friendship and enmity" (3). In this respect, despite the children's "doubly marginalized" postcolonial condition (Lovesey 193)—which, according to Ratheiser, has much in common with a "schizophrenic situation" (88)—seeing the present through their innocent eyes opens up new terrain and new ways of appreciating the world in all its complexity which is useful for discarding old divisive and exclusive concepts of social interaction and putting more equal and mutually respecting ones in their place.

Conclusion

The beginning of the article focused on the image of the young girl on the front cover of Akpan's collection of short stories running down the dirt path. Putting the picture's captivating depiction of energy, of movement, of action, of human agency in the context of Akpan's stories, it becomes clear that the girl is running from the adult world. After her initiation into the adult world, as is reflected in her

beautifully embellished dress, the girl representing the child protagonists of the three stories prefers running toward the horizon where the land meets the sky—where the living and the dead are reunited—to staying put in a place of division and strife; she is looking for an 'other-world' based on an affiliative trans-ethnic subjective in-between—a space that allows Monique's family to re-establish its former trans-cultural bonds, enables Jinga to receive the education he desires without having to turn into a social parasite feasting on his sisters' exploitation, and permits the Christian and the Muslim girl to re-explore the sounds of spoken words. As Peter Kalliney avers, personal "traumas associated with migrations, both voluntary and forced...try to recuperate a sense of agency in the experience of cultural dislocation": a sense of agency that is based on "a productive ambivalence towards mobility and migration" (4). In actively breaking with and undermining the violence and injustice of the present web of relationships, the children of the three stories have more in common with underdogs than victims, not least since "[v]ictimhood denies agency to the individual" (Odhiambo 81). In acting outside the perceived norm of filial obligation the children break with its inherent violence that only seems to perpetuate the suffering. Even if their actions may not seek forgiveness in the original meaning of the term, their positioning themselves outside the social practice of retributive violence—initiating new chains of action rather than merely re-acting to the suffering caused by this form of the subjective in-between—opens up new possibilities for the future. It is the child protagonists' unprovoked loss of innocence that emphasises our own culpability in their suffering and facilitates an emotional and intellectual reappraisal of the present social web or relationships. Remembering Frank Kermode's well-known statement that "[t]he moments we call crises are [both,] ends and beginnings" (96), the three stories highlight that there is creative potential even, or particularly, at a time of unspeakable violence and social upheaval. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, "if paradise...arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way" (7). It is this shift in outlook that the stories' children in contrast to their parents engender: in "*reversing the terms of the intersubjective encounter*" (Jackson 17) they reclaim a sense of agency and break free from the confines of an incomprehensibly brutal world. The children's action in turn attests that personal and communal "disasters often unfold as though a revolution has already taken place" (Solnit 305) allowing for the foundation of a new subjective in-between that is based on "altruism, mutual aid, and solidarity, on...acts of individuals and organizations who are motivated by hope and by love rather than fear" (313). Just as Jinga's love and respect for his sisters results in his cutting ties with his family, the Christian girl in "What Language is That?" goes against her parents' will and secretly re-establishes a communicative bond with their Muslim neighbours, and Monique upholds her family's former affiliative trans-ethnic beliefs by looking after her brother despite his bodily features which resemble those of Papa's ethnic group. This notion of resisting factious

violence and the social exclusion of others is also reflected in the two biblical epigraphs. Rather than condoning or taking part in the cruelties of the present, the children in Akpan's stories take flight and search for a new home. It is the children's brave move to face the insecurities of the unknown that spurs one's imagination and makes one realise that not everyone has been immobilised and blunted beyond comprehension by the injustices of the present dispensation.

Thus, the stories' "[h]ope for the future, however tenuous, is founded in the resilience of children, who will always try to make a life out of broken shards of adults' dreams" (Lakeland 29). This is where Akpan's power as a storyteller lies: "[i]t has been said, often and truthfully, that genius is nothing other than the ability to recapture childhood at will—but this has to include the terrors and desires of childhood not just its Arcadian innocence" (Hughes in Holloway 56). Experiencing the world through the eyes of suffering children, we cannot but feel guilty about the world we have created. "When those who suffer gaze back at those who do not," as Ellison rightly points out, "guilt is the consequence" (256). The fact that the stories' children no longer simply gaze back at us in wonderment but decide to take action and run away makes it all the more important "to explore not only the ways in which [these] stories take us beyond ourselves, but [also to take into account how they] *transform our experience* and bring us back to ourselves, changed" (Jackson 138). In this sense, Akpan's stories are an invitation both to see the world differently and to take a public stand, and to condemn the violence inherent in our present social web of relationships.

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