

WRITING THE ANGEL: HELON HABILO'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL*

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The prison as metaphor for life under the military state.....	13
Chapter Two: Lomba as Synecdoche for the Experience of the Nation: the movement from lethargy to defiance.....	30
Chapter Three: The Imagination as Tool: Undermining the oppressor’s walls.....	43
Chapter Four: Layering History: Intertextuality and Multivocality, the novel form as liberation.....	56
Chapter Five: Complicating the Symbolic and Re-orienting the role of the Writer.....	73
Chapter Six: Breaking into History: destabilizing the boundaries between fiction and reality through the social imagination.....	88
Conclusion.....	111
Appendix 1: A Brief Biography of Helon Habila.....	116
Appendix 2: Historical Background.....	120
Appendix 3: A Chronological Reconstruction of the Novel.....	124
Bibliography.....	128

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INTRODUCTION

History has the cruel reality of a nightmare, and the grandeur of man consists in his making beautiful and lasting works out of the real substance of that nightmare. Or to put it another way, it consists in transforming the nightmare into vision, in freeing ourselves from the shapeless horror of reality—if only for an instant by means of creation.
 –Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 104.

In Christopher Okonkwo’s paper “Talking and Te(x)tifying: Ndibe, Habila, and Adichie’s ‘Dialogic’ Narrativizations of Nigeria’s Post War Nadir: 1984-1998” given at the 2005 African Studies Association conference, he suggests that three contemporary Nigerian novels Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain*, Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* can be “linked ‘dialogically’ [t]hat is, these are novels unconsciously in dialogue—they are talking about, conversing, and/or contributing discrete discursive voices or perspectives on that subject of Nigeria’s post-war bleak epoch” (par. 4).¹ This “unconscious” dialogue between the novels is inherently linked to the state of Nigeria that all three novelists describe in their novels. As such the actual historical condition of Nigeria and the events that took place during the period of dictatorship from 1984-1998 are used as a type of text that is alluded to symbolically in each of the novels, creating an unconscious form of intertextuality. Moreover, Okonkwo argues, all three texts “‘te(x)stify’ to the horrors of the nadir, thereby performing, recuperating and affirming the power and resiliency of that human and civil right of ‘voice’ which the army sought desperately to stifle and invalidate” (par. 4). These texts themselves “perform” and together “chart a liberation imperative and trajectory.” That is by retelling the history of

Nigeria, the three novels are able to reinterpret and symbolically re-imagine in their texts the movement from “nihilism to hope, absence to presence, and from apathy to action” (par. 8).

In my thesis, I will focus specifically on how Helon Habila’s novel *Waiting for an Angel* shows how the imagination can provide liberation from this historical “nadir,” what Octavio Paz calls the “nightmare” of history. While my main focus is on *Waiting for an Angel* published by Norton in 2002, I will also use the “collection of organically related short stories,” *Prison Stories*, that Habila self-published in 2000 to inform my analysis.²

Argument

In brief, I argue that although the writer does not have the power to physically change the oppressive conditions of the military state, the writer can undermine the psychological oppression of the military state through the defiant use of the imagination. By rejecting the illusion of monolithic power that the state projects and by connecting with and listening to the stories of a larger community, the writer can simultaneously help shape a social imagination and rewrite history from the perspective of the community. This social imagination, while not immediately dominant, can eventually lead to physical change. While many African novels engage with these ideas, I will focus specifically on how they manifest in Helon Habila’s novel *Waiting for an Angel*. By first looking at the metaphor of the military state as a prison or a puppet-text, I will show how Habila uses his writer character, Lomba, as a synecdoche for the inhabitants of the prison-state and demonstrates the agency available to them.³ Lomba’s move from lethargy to imaginative defiance is echoed in the actions of many other characters throughout the novel. The revolutionary potential of the

imagination is evident in the form of the novel itself, as Habila uses the multi-vocal, intertextual, and fragmented text to demonstrate how fiction can affect history.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter One, I explore Habila's metaphoric presentation of historical oppression, as a prison or predetermined text in which the inhabitants are trapped. I will look at how the novel reflects historical forms of oppression that were found in Nigeria under the military rule of the 1980s and 90s: both through the decay of a stripped national infrastructure and through the repression of those who speak out against the government. Out of these two types of physical oppression come fear and lethargy as the populace attempts to live in an environment in which their dreams are continuously crushed.

In Chapter Two, I will examine how Habila presents the character Lomba as a synecdoche for the nation and how his move from lethargy to action is reflected in the larger populace.

In Chapter Three, I will look specifically at how Lomba demonstrates the power of the imagination to undermine the prison walls, blurring the boundaries between his imagination and his reality. Through the conscious use of the form of the "harmless love poem" and by using the tool of intertextuality, he not only tricks his jailor into delivering secret messages for him but he also imagines an audience that eventually arrives to give him hope.

In Chapter Four, I will look at how Lomba's use of the imagination is reflected in the outer form of Habila's novel. I will specifically focus on Habila's use of intertextuality to indicate the permeable boundaries between multiple stories. By layering onto settings from

other stories and by appropriating characters from multiple sources, he demonstrates the permeable boundaries of the novel. The existence of multiple texts and multiple voices within the text undermines the illusion of psychological power that the oppressor tries to maintain.

In Chapter Five, I examine the complex backgrounds and motivations of the characters in the novel, which complicate a simple symbolic reading. Most importantly, Habila deconstructs the illusion of the heroic writer, emphasizing the necessity of the writer's connection to a community. The writer's engagement with the community connects the dreams of the people with the imaginative tools available to the writer: out of this relationship can emerge a powerful social imagination with the power to affect history, such as when Lomba's story comes to life and the women take their rebellion further than he had imagined it.

In Chapter Six, I will look at how Habila blurs the boundaries not only between other texts but also between the historical reality of his own experience and the fictional world of the novel. By making a brief cameo appearance in the novel, Habila creates a rift in the boundaries between reality and fiction that destabilizes the text. His use of multiple narrators and overlapping chronological sequences in the stories further contributes to the focus on defiance in the face of despair. Finally, the text hints that the angel of death used as a tool of terror by the military state is turned around by the author. Habila implies that the angel of death from his novel escapes the bounds of fiction and into the historical bedroom of Abacha—a powerful illustration of the power inherent in the social imagination.

Summary of the Novel

The seven chapter novel is a chronologically fractured, multi-vocal narrative little changed from Habila's original collection of short stories except for the addition of the chapter "Alice," an "Afterward," and the excision of the short story "The Iron Gate." Reconstructed into chronological order, the chapters in *Waiting for an Angel* trace the life of a young man Lomba from the north of Nigeria who comes to Lagos to go to university. In his early days at the university he has his fortune told by a beach marabout and has a brief affair with the daughter of a general. After the death of his roommate Bola's family and the military suppression of the student demonstrations when the university "began to look like prison" (112), Lomba drops out of school to write a novel. Eventually in need of employment, he becomes a journalist at *Dial* magazine. He meets his old lover, Alice, the daughter of the general, but she cannot marry him because she has promised to marry another military man who is paying for her mother's medical bills. After another lover leaves him, his personal life is caught in the nightmare of horrifying political assassinations and media suppression. After meeting the Morgan street activist Joshua, he is convinced of the need to deal with politics in his writing, even more so after the *Dial* offices are burned and he and his editors flee the secret police. Despite the risk, he covers the Morgan Street demonstration and is arrested. Imprisoned indefinitely, he finds solace in writing love poetry, which the prison superintendent plagiarizes to woo another woman. While the superintendent's girlfriend eventually figures out that Lomba is writing the poetry and demands to see him, Lomba is not released from prison. The chronological end of the novel comes at the end of the first chapter, leaving the end of Lomba's life to the imagination of the reader: he might die in prison, but then again, he might be released.

This summary gives a basic idea of the events of the novel as they might be recorded by Lomba's biographer but it does not do justice to the form of the novel in which as Francis King notes in his review of the novel "[t]he nine [sic] sections of his story are like a series of pictures in some of which a young ambitious and highly intelligent journalist called Lomba provides the brightly lit focal point and in others is seen merely as a small, shadowy presence sketched in at an edge" (67).

Theoretical Background

The major theoretical basis for my analysis comes from tools provided within the novel itself. In *The Poem and the Story*, Harold Scheub states that at the heart of every story is "...the engine of the story, that which animates and motivates, that which provides the rhythmical flow of the story, that which elicits, controls, and thereby shapes the emotions of the audience into metaphor—the poetic center of the story" (*Poem* 23). Although there can arguably be multiple "poetic centers" in any novel, the moment that frames my analysis of *Waiting for an Angel* is the students' encounter with the marabout on a Lagos beach in Chapter Two, "The Angel." This, I argue is the central metaphor out of which the rest of the story flows.⁴ An initial close reading of this episode will supply the background for the argument in the rest of this thesis that the move from oppression to an imaginative resistance prepares the way for physical change:

Near the beginning of the chronological events of the novel, the university students Bola, Lomba, and an unnamed friend wander away from the old slave port in Badagry, to look for a fortune teller on the beach. When they find him, he tells them he is "not a fortune-teller:"

I am a poet. I listen to the waves for tales of other shores and of the deep.... Life is like a wave motion, full of highs and lows. We sit on life's shores with our hand open, waiting to receive. But the water knows, more than we do, what we need and what we don't need. It takes away from us what we don't need and drops it at another shore where it is needed. Sometimes it returns to us what it took away, refined and augmented with brine and other sea materials. The sea, like death, is not an end but a beginning. Beneath it there is no bed, but another surface, another air. (*Waiting* 46-47)

On an initial reading, the marabout's philosophy seems fatalistic. He has removed himself from society, merely to sit by the shores waiting for tales to come to him. If "life" is caught up in an environment as vast and powerful as the ocean, a human being is like a piece of sand that is thrown back and forth on the waves. Fate, like the deep and restless waters determines "what we need and what we don't need." By foretelling a dark future for Bola and his friend, the marabout seems to indicate that the students are locked into history, into a story told for them, the end of which is already determined. If the characters are "given th[e] privilege" of knowing the end of their stories (48), then it seems that this knowledge encourages them to sit passively, letting the waves of fate determine their actions, waiting for the end. This attitude of "waiting" characterizes many of the characters in the subsequent novel.

Yet, the end of the marabout's meditation implies that there is something more to life than "waiting to receive." While in an initial reading, the marabout appears to merely reinforce a deterministic fate for the three students, a more complex reading shows that his telling of the future actually enables and encourages their later resistance. Although the stories the marabout tells the students may seem lock them into a story that has been told for them, the marabout's own position as a "poet" undermines the stability of the stories he has predicted for them. The poet's use of metaphor and simile demonstrates the slippery nature

of language in which their futures have been told. At the beginning of his story he tells them that “Life is like a wave motion... we sit on life’s shores...” He uses the ocean and its motion as a metaphor for life. Yet only a few sentences later, he tells the students that “the sea, like death, is not an end but a beginning” (47). Within one paragraph of text, the marabout uses the sea as simile and metaphor for both life and for death, blurring the boundaries between two terms usually used as absolute opposites. This ambiguity is furthered by the implications of his statement about “the sea, like death, is not an end but a beginning.” If death is a beginning, then what is the true “end” of the story? If below the sea that is metaphoric for both life and death, “there is no bed, but another surface, another air,” then there seem to be multiple levels of life, and multiple levels of interpretation on how to understand that life. If the characters are locked into a story told for them, the marabout makes it clear that there are “tales of other shores and of the deep,” that interject themselves into the story in which the characters are living. Throughout the rest of the novel this differentiation of the multiple levels of life seems to focus most on the differentiation between the surface “factual” layer and a deeper psychological or philosophical layer. The marabout’s prediction of where the students will end up, therefore, does not lock them into one unavoidable fate, but merely provides the “factual” layer of the story of their lives. This knowledge of their future actually frees the students to reinterpret the story they are living in—to act in ways that alter the way they arrive at that future.

When the narrator of “The Angel” knows on the morning of the military coup that he will die that day, he feels free to act out his rebellion against the soldiers in the bar and he dies with the thought of the ancient Christian martyrs dying alongside him. Although the term “waiting” is used by the marabout and is used to refer to the state of waiting for the

angel of death, the character does not merely lie at home waiting to die. Neither does he flee the bar in fear when he hears the news of the coup. Instead he goes to meet the angel of death, wanting his death to have “meaning.” Whether his death has meaning depends on which level it is being read, just as the marabout’s philosophy of life does. On one hand, the death he has been expecting is disappointing. While the ancient Christian martyrs demonstrated their resistance in front of masses of people watching in the coliseums, by the time the soldiers arrive in the bar in “The Angel,” the masses have fled to their homes. The narrator performs his resistance only to the two soldiers and the terrified bartender. It seems a meaningless waste of life. One wonders if he was really fated to die or whether his conviction that he was led him to suicide. On the other hand, beyond the physical demonstration of resistance, his death has meaning in demonstrating the psychological liberation he has found. If the rest of the people in the bar are afraid to resist, he is not. His resistance, no matter how futile, demonstrates to the soldiers that they are not completely in control. Like all martyrs, he shows that the oppressors may be able to kill him but they have no power over his mind. This, at root, is what the rest of Habila’s novel reinforces on multiple levels: the necessity of mental resistance even in the face of despair. The character’s ambiguous death reflects the words of the marabout that seem to both fix an event in time and undermine that event through interpretation—if this is a suicide then it is one that demonstrates that he is in control of his own life and death, much like the prisoners’ hunger strike in Wole Soyinka’s memoir, *The Man Died* that I will explore in Chapter Four.

This ambiguity extends to the form in which the story is told. On the formal level of narration, the story “The Angel” is problematic because, “factually,” it is impossible for a character to narrate his own death. However, if the marabout has used language to blur those

absolute boundaries between life and death, between the surfaces of reality and those of fiction, he implies that the poet's mastery over language allows him to transgress the "factual" laws of reality to create a text that is meaningful on a deeper philosophical level.⁵ Habila's transgression of the laws of "reality" in "The Angel" prepares for other dramatic breaks with conventional narration in the rest of the novel. The paradoxical philosophy the marabout proposes not only simultaneously affirms and deconstructs a deterministic reading of history, but it also creates ambiguities that ripple throughout the formal and philosophical levels of the text, providing the interpretive lens through which the rest of the novel can be read.

In setting up my argument, I have also engaged with several theoretical models. First, I note that Habila builds on top of a long tradition of African political art. The concept of the power of word and art that can be used both for oppression or liberation is an ancient one that has been thoroughly explicated by Harold Scheub in his corpus of work on story, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, and by many other postcolonial theorists.⁶ Neither is the metaphor of the military state as a prison or a predetermined text original to Habila's novel. He layers his fiction on top of similar extended metaphors in the works of Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and others. Soyinka's theorization in his essay "The Fourth Stage," of the god Ogun as the tragic creative hero, who "channels anguish into a creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative inventions, which without usurping the territory of the infernal gulf bridges it with visionary hopes" provides a useful theoretical model for explicating Habila's heroic writer, Lomba, whose imaginative escape from prison provides a prototype for the psychological empowerment of the

community (*Art* 30-31). However, the writer as presented by Habila is not as much of an individual hero as Soyinka's Ogun—indeed, in his final chapter “James,” Habila fictionally undermines the claims of artists who claim a martyr's status without equal political and social commitment. Instead, the writer and his community are portrayed as living in a symbiotic relationship with each other, the interaction between the two necessary before hope is created. The writer takes multiple stories and weaves them into a form that resists monologic impulses. Ultimately, the seeds of interpretative potential are provided within the text itself by the figure of the marabout who calls himself a “poet”—who has the power both to see the future of the preordained text in which the characters live and to undermine that text through his reference to multiple levels of reality.⁷

NOTES:

¹ Professor Okonkwo presented this paper at the 2005 African Studies Association Conference in Washington D.C. and has generously shared the unpublished paper with me for use in this thesis.

² Reference comes from the back cover copy of *Prison Stories*.

³ In *A Handbook to Literature*, William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman define “synecdoche” as “a TROPE in which a part signifies the whole or the whole signifies the part” (510). When I refer to Lomba as “a synecdoche for the nation,” I am arguing that the man Lomba can be considered a metaphoric representative of all the other people of the nation. This is a common motif in many other works of African literature: Matigari in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel *Matigari* can be considered a synecdoche for all of the Kenyan freedom fighters; Wole Soyinka can be read as a synecdoche of an imprisoned Nigeria in his prison memoir *The Man Died*, just as “the man” in Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* can be read as a synecdoche for Ghana.

⁴ The chapter “The Angel” is changed only slightly from Habila’s short story “Waiting for Angel” found in his initial collection of short stories, *Prison Stories*. The appropriation of the title of the original short story for the title of the subsequent novel indicates the importance of this particular story to the interpretation of the novel.

⁵ The ambiguities implied throughout “The Angel” are symptomatic of the entire novel preparing for other such egregious inattention to the established laws of “reality”: Habila should not place well known historical events that occurred decades apart on the same fictional day. The author Habila should not climb into his own fictional world. But his transgression of these formal laws of reality becomes integral to the meaning of the novel.

⁶ For example, Charles Bird with Mamadou Koita, and Bourama Soumaouro write in *The Songs of Seydour Camara, vol 1* that “the bard is the master of the word and words are considered to have a mystical force which can bring supernatural energies to bear. These energies can both augment and diminish a man’s power to act. In this context, the bard’s responsibility for controlling words is extremely great” (quoted in Peek 29).

⁷ Habila’s use of ambiguity to deconstruct monolithic ideals of oppression or liberation can also be compared to the principles inherent in the Yoruba god Esu, as explicated by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

CHAPTER ONE: The prison as metaphor for life under the military state

“Nigeria jaga jaga, everything scatter scatter, Poor man dey suffer suffer... It’s like prison, prison.... ” –Eedris Abdulkareem, *Jaga Jaga*¹

If the story of the marabout I explored in the introduction introduces an overarching anxiety about a tragic determinism in life, the rest of the novel makes it clear that this anxiety refers to the specific conditions of life in Nigeria under military rule. In this chapter, I will explore how Habila uses the metaphor of the literal prison alongside the extended metaphor of the imprisoning text to look at both physical and psychological oppression. As I stated in my introduction, although the original name of the collection of short stories, *Prison Stories* was changed to *Waiting for an Angel* when it was published as a novel, both titles are significant to my interpretation of the novel. Reading both titles side by side indicates the importance of multiple stories written in a prison state as well as the redemptive elements that such stories can bring. Lomba, the journalist whose life is explored from many different angles throughout the multi-voiced narration, is imprisoned in the first chapter of the novel, and the rest of the novel traces the life that leads to this imprisonment. He is, apparently, fated for prison from the beginning of the chronological events of the novel when the marabout tells his fortune; however, this fate is tied to a specifically historical condition in Nigeria, the larger imprisonment of the country under a seemingly unending cycle of dictatorships, interrupted by only brief interludes of democracy.

Habila reinforces the powerful repressive impulse of the dictatorial government by blurring the boundaries of one military regime and another; he replaces events that happened under the 1985-1993 regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, such as the assassination of

journalist and *Newswatch Magazine* editor Dele Giwa, into the five year span from 1993-1998 of General Sani Abacha's regime. This conflation of military regimes is potently illustrated in the chapter "Kela," when the boy Kela describes "the Women Centre [which was]... the biggest and newest building on the street" in the poor neighborhood where he lives. "Everybody started using the shorter name, Women Centre, when the full name changed from Mariam Babangida Women Centre to Mariam Abacha Women Centre. The first name was still faintly visible, in white ink, beneath the hastily painted new name in blue" (123). One military regime merely replaces another, the last name may be different but the soul of it, represented here in the first names of both dictator's wives, is the same.

Although the acts committed under the historical regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha are fictionally compressed in the novel, the Abacha coup takes on a particular significance in indicating the seemingly deterministic cyclic nature of the military state. The hope for change that had been characterized in the student demonstrations and strikes preceding and following the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections is finally quashed in the moment when Abacha, echoing the last two military coups that he had announced, broadcasts his takeover of the transition government led by Ernest Shonekan.² As Habila notes in his afterward to *Waiting for an Angel*, "Every day came with new limitations, new prisons.... [T]he only mission the military rulers had was systematically to loot the national treasury; their only morality was a vicious survivalist agenda in which any hint of disloyalty was ruthlessly crushed" (224). Habila's statement provides a useful two-part explication of the kinds of oppression explored in the novel. First, there is the looting of the national treasury and funds meant for the upkeep of the national infrastructure and second there is the direct suppression of the more vocal members of the population. In the

following two sections, I will look first at the suffering of the masses due to a deteriorating infrastructure and then look at suffering of those who dare to speak out against the abuses of the military.

The Prison of corruption and incompetence

When the editor James gives Lomba his first writing assignment for the *Dial*, he tells him “One General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness” (113). While the “wretchedness” of individuals lives, as illustrated in the novel through poverty and death, is not always directly caused by the military, it is certainly linked to the overall living conditions disintegrating under the military’s misdirection of funds. Lomba writes his assignment for James using Morgan Street, where he lives, “as a paradigmatic locale, the fuel scarcity as the main theme. The long lines of cars waiting for fuel at petrol stations and obstructing traffic I use as a thread to weave together the various aspects of the article; in front of the petrol pumps I place the ubiquitous gun and whip-toting soldiers, collecting money from drivers to expedite their progress towards the pumps” (117). At the beginning of Lomba’s essay we see the direct intervention of the military into everyday life. First, at its root, the fuel scarcity is caused by the funneling off of resources by high level military elite; the natural resources of the nation exploited to benefit the individual Swiss bank accounts of those at the highest level of governance. The petrol queues are especially, ironic, as James note because Nigeria is “a major producer of oil” (113). If the resources were being properly managed, Nigeria should not have a petrol shortage.

Second, the lower level military perform grass-roots level exploitation. Placed in front of the petrol pumps ostensibly to control the masses as they wait to receive their allotted amount of petrol, the soldiers model their leaders, using their individual job placements to claim their own cut of the national cake. Those without the means to pay off the soldiers are forced to wait in long lines, at the risk of the petrol finishing before they reach the pumps. Even those drivers who have obtained petrol find traffic “obstructed” by the long queues, further slowing down the city’s ability to function. Military exploitation has corrupted the very rules by which society functions.

Lomba self-consciously uses this example of the petroleum debacle and the direct appearance by the military at the pumps to “weave together” other aspects of life on Morgan Street.

I place the pot-bellied, glaucomatous kids of Morgan Street, with their high-defined ribs, beside the open gutters where they usually play; in the gutters I place a carcass or two of mongrel dogs worried by vultures. In shady corners, under verandahs and broken trucks, I position winos to pass the day in vinous slumber. For local colour, I bring in the aged and the dying to peep through open windows into the street at youths holding roach communions at alley-mouths—passing the stick from hand to hand, with knives and guns in their pockets, biding their time. To conclude, I use the kerosene-starved housewives of Morgan Street. I make them rampage the streets, tearing down wooden signboards and billboards and hauling them away to their kitchens to use as firewood. (117-118)

The “ubiquitous gun and whip-toting soldiers” at the petrol pumps in Lomba’s essay are metonymic for the military presence as a whole. In the rest of the essay, Lomba describes the results of the military intervention. While the undernourishment of the kids playing in the gutters is not directly caused by the military, the conditions caused by the military contribute to this poverty. The money that goes to bribe a soldier for petrol likely increases the cost of public transportation. The money that goes for a petrol bribe or to higher public

transportation costs might have been the money that parents need to buy food or kerosene to cook that food. The mongrel dogs whose carcasses lie in the gutters breeding disease have likely been killed by a driver speeding on the side of the road to avoid the traffic gnarled by petrol queues. The lack of funds to keep businesses running under the infrastructural decay results in widespread unemployment: lethargic winos on the street, youth who do not respect and serve “the aged and the dying,” but instead form gangs to provide a living for themselves by taking by force what they cannot purchase. The one bit of liberating imagination Lomba employs in his description of Morgan Street, the desperate agency of the housewives who tear down sign-posts to use for firewood, is dismissed by his editor as “laying it on a bit thick” (118). Such a blatant act of public rebellion in a military state seems unlikely.³

Lomba does not need to explicate how the military’s presence causes poverty, as I have done here, because his readers live the experiences he describe and understand the link between the military and the deteriorating living conditions. Later the activist Joshua comes looking for Lomba to cover the Morgan Street demonstration because he recognizes the essay on Morgan Street as a microcosmic description of the trouble of infrastructural oppression facing Nigeria. The description laid out in Lomba’s text is like an outline for the expanded descriptions of poverty in other stories incorporated into *Waiting for an Angel* and *Prison Stories*. The young boy from Jos, Kela, describes Morgan Street with fresh eyes, filling out the “particular details” of the wretchedness of the masses: the tailor Brother, whose legs are rumoured to have been lost in a fight with a soldier, who is waiting for his dream of wealth to come true; the single mother Nancy who is waiting for her lover to return; Kela’s Auntie Rachael who became a wino and began to “dream backwards” (138)

after the man she loved was “burnt inside his car” during the “Abiola riots,” when the election was overturned by the military (146); Kela’s teacher Joshua’s “secret obsession” (147) Hagar who had been a “brilliant student[, t]he best in her class” (150), but who became a prostitute after being sexually abused by her drunken stepfather. All of these characters live with broken dreams, dreams that have been twisted out of their control by the environment in which they live. Likewise, their ability to act seems to have been drained away; they all seem to be waiting.

In “The Iron Gate,” the only story from *Prison Stories* that did not make it into *Waiting for an Angel*, a specific link is made between the poverty of the masses and the corruption of the military, which has continued the exploitation of the colonial legacy, filtering the nation’s wealth through a national elite to benefit the West.⁴ Like Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross* which imagines a grotesque competition of “thieves and robbers” in which the neo-colonial elite imagine building pipelines of blood, sweat, and brains from Kenya to the West (*Devil* 187), “The Iron Gate,” describes a similar sort of “lifeblood” export in the structures of a “multi-national oil company, owned by Europeans and Americans and a few Nigerian military officers.” The company advertises for ten drivers and five hundred applicants show up in the rain to wait outside the gates. Like the desperate unemployed inhabitants of Morgan Street described in Lomba’s essay, “some are rheumy-eyed from aborted sleep, some are still heady from last night’s wine, some are dizzy from accumulated hunger.... They carry plastic bags in which their credentials are carefully folded.... Most ... are moldy from long storage” (*Prison Stories* 123). The moldy credentials of the job applicants are metaphoric for the disintegrating and un-used potential of the nation as a whole.

The “few military officers” who have sold out the nation’s oil and the administration of its harvesting to the “Europeans and Americans” are the same ones who have caused the fuel shortage Lomba describes as emblematic of the nation’s crisis. The writer and activist Joshua, like Lomba, identifies the military’s misappropriation of petroleum funds as a specific link to the poverty of the streets.

We, the honest, and peace-loving and taxpaying citizens of Morgan Street, are tired of waiting for the government to come to us, That’s why we came. We came to tell you, Sir, that our clinic is run down and abandoned; we came to tell you that we don’t have a single borehole on Morgan Street and we have to go to other streets to fetch water; our schools are overcrowded, and our children have to buy their own seats and tables because the ones there have not been replaced since the schools were built ten years ago! (*Waiting* 173)

Just as Lomba, in his essay, implies the scarcity of essentials due to the petrol shortage, Joshua points out that the masses are having to pay for necessities that are the government’s responsibilities. Morgan Street, which Joshua surmises is named after “some colonial administrator, perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state,” is poverty stricken, and indeed is a potent metaphor for the neglected country at large (174). The government has abandoned their responsibilities to the “taxpaying” community; Joshua asks, “Where is the subsidized drug programme promised us from the Special Petroleum Trust Fund?... We are dying from lack of hope” (173-4).⁵

This lack of hope is bred in an environment, such as that described in “The Iron Gate,” in which dreams are continually crushed. If the Petroleum Fund is not fulfilling promises to subsidize drugs, neither is Nigeria’s largest export providing enough jobs to the populace. In “The Iron Gate,” Habila imagines the job applicants standing outside “the companies high walls with barbed wire and broken bottles on top, and the huge iron gate at the front” (*Prison Stories* 123). The walls that keep them out of the gleaming “paradise” of

the company's interior are the same walls that are described as holding Lomba in the prison: "In the distance, the prison wall loomed huge and merciless, like a mountain. Broken bottles, Barbed wire" (*Waiting* 21). The dreams of the people of Morgan street or of the applicants in front of the "iron gate," lie beyond the prison walls represented by the military governance.

Not only does the decay of infrastructure breed unemployment and poverty, but the governmental neglect of public clinics and road safety also lessens overall life expectancy, a trap in which even the middle class is caught. The dream-crushing desperation first experienced by the unemployed masses, the winos, the area boys, and labourers, is also experienced by upper class civil servants and university intellectuals. The tragedy in the chapter "Bola" symbolically illustrates both kinds of oppression under military rule: the suppression of dreams that results from crumbling infrastructure, as well as that which results from the direct repression of protest.

Lomba's friend Bola embodies the enthusiasm of youth crushed by the military machinery. Bola, the Lagos boy who is Lomba's roommate in university, is irrepressibly enthusiastic about life. His family warmly adopts the northern Lomba as one of their own, and Lomba "found I had a home from home" in Lagos (65). While Lomba broods, Bola is swept along in the euphoria of student protests against the Babangida government, exuberantly repeating the revolutionary words of the significantly-named student leader Sankara,⁶ "Remember what Soyinka wrote, 'The man dies in him who stands silent in the face of tyranny.' And according to Amilcar Cabral, 'Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor.' ... we can't continue to be onlookers when a handful of gun-toating thugs are determined to push our beloved nation over the precipice..." (55). Bola embodies the

optimism and defiance of a youth determined to break the cycle of corrupt military rule. It is especially ironic that Bola becomes a part of this enthusiastic student movement only one day before his parents and sister are killed and his life derailed. Bola's personal tragedy of losing his parents and sister in a fatal road accident takes on a larger metaphoric significance.

The euphoria of revolution is twisted into madness in Bola after death enters the picture. In Wole Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*, Sekoni, the one idealistic character who acts with a energetic passion in his attempts to build up the nation, dies when his car crashes into "the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path" (*Interpreters* 155). In *Waiting for an Angel*, Bola's father, mother, and sister die on the same road when "[t]he father, driving, had failed to see the truck lying on its side in the road. It was a military truck carrying the furniture of an officer on transfer from Lagos to Ibadan" (*Waiting* 61). The "road" that has for so long concerned Soyinka is the same, but there is a further significance to the family's tragedy. The military truck that the family runs into is metaphoric for the central problem introduced into the society since *The Interpreters* was written in the mid-1960s: military rule. The crash with the military truck both reflects and foreshadows the obstacle repeatedly placed in the country's restless movement toward democracy in 1993, first by Babangida's June annulment of the elections and second by Abacha's November coup.

Here, not only is one visionary young engineer, representative of the nation-builder, killed, but an entire family structure is wiped out: the father/doctor, the mother/secretary at the Ministry of Finance, the daughter/future newscaster. In short, crucial elements of the existing and future infrastructure of the nation are lost in the crash with the military vehicle: the man who will help heal the diseased and wounded bodies of the populace; the woman

who will maintain the accounts of a country soon to be even more ruthlessly looted by the Abacha regime; and the teenage girl who sees no contradiction in one of her gender and nationality hoping to offer a voice on the stage of the global media. The optimism of the future generation is twisted into the despair of loss. In retrospect, the tragic encounter with the military vehicle is foreshadowed even by Bola's devotion to the student leader Sankara, an obvious reference to Thomas Sankara. The revolutionary populist leader of Burkina Faso was assassinated in 1987 in a coup led by Blaise Compaore, who became the life-president of Burkina Faso. It is as though any revolutionary hope is destined to be crushed by those greedy for power.⁷

On the literal level, Bola's family is lost to a tragic accident. Their deaths are not the result of a literal or intentional assassination by the military. However, the symbolism of the crash with the military vehicle implicates the military on the level of infrastructural neglect. The rest of Bola's tragedy, his madness and his abuse by the police, illustrates the second kind of oppression—the direct and brutal suppression of even the weakest voice of protest.

The Prison of repression: The Military's suppression of Alternate Voices

When Bola goes out into the streets of Lagos “repeating, word for word,” the speech Sankara had given the day before at the protest rally, it is a bitter distortion of the hopeful enthusiasm of the demonstrations (74). Although there is something obviously wrong with him, as he is foaming at the mouth and dressed only in his boxer shorts and an old T-shirt, he is arrested by security agents, who will brook no voice of dissent. When the people on the street protest his arrest, the security agents fire their guns into the crowd. Bola's impotent

parody of the student leader and his subsequent arrest are significant—a metaphor for the impotence of protest in a prison.

Christopher Okonkwo notes of Nigeria (following Lomba's remarks to Kela) that “‘the dream’ of independence becomes a nightmare. Voice, as normative speech act, public political dissidence or ‘text’/literary/journalistic self-expression, is silenced...” (par 1). In the novel every defiant action seems to lead to an even worse result. Each counter-narrative is brutally repressed. This is illustrated on the individual level of resistance and the larger more organized level of protest: On the individual level, Bola, mad with grief, repeats the student leader Sankara's speech and is dragged away by secret police to be beaten. In prison, Lomba secretly writes to keep himself sane, and when it is discovered he is beaten and put into solitary confinement. The historical characters Dele Giwa and Kudirat Abiola are “the loudest voice[s] against continued military rule in the country” and are assassinated (*Waiting* 199). The narrator of “The Angel” defies the soldier's order to leave the bar, and he is shot. On the organizational level, when the university students demonstrate, the soldiers come to campus to rape the female students and ransack rooms, in the process destroying Lomba's poetry and journals. Ultimately, the university itself is closed. When the people of Morgan Street demonstrate to protest the deplorable conditions in their neighborhood that they have renamed “Poverty Street,” characters symbolic of the next generation are killed in the scramble to escape the tear gas the soldiers have fired: a pregnant woman, a young boy, and the secret love of the demonstration organizer, a former student turned prostitute. The death of the prostitute Hagar is particularly illustrative of the two levels of oppression. Hagar's fall from brilliant student to prostitute is not a direct result of military rule. Rather, she is a casualty of the dysfunctional environment in which she lives. When she rallies herself to

overcome this first level of environmental oppression to voice protest against the neglect of the regime, she is killed while running across the street to get away from the tear-gas. She is a victim both of her environment and of the direct repression of the military.

This repression also extends to the media. When the *Dial* prints a front page with the headlines screaming “Abacha: the Stolen Billions,” the publication’s office is destroyed by arson and an arrest warrant put out for the editor James (201). The crack down of the military against these dissenting voices snowballs in the final chapter, “James,” on the day the *Dial* is burned down: in addition to the warrant against James, the “editors of the *Concord* and *The Sunday Magazine*” are arrested, Dele Giwa is killed by letter bomb, and Kudirat Abiola is shot (200, 119, 213).

This suppression of voices by the dictatorial regime in the actual Nigeria and the Nigeria of Habila’s novel is similar to the effects of what M. M. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* calls unitary language in ideological systems, which struggle to suppress the reality of heteroglossia (270). In refusing to allow voices of opposition, the totalitarian post-colonial state takes on the rigid force of authoritative discourse, which

demands our unconditional allegiance. ...[A]uthoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transition, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it.... It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority. (Bakhtin 343)

The state attempts to perform a monologue by silencing any alternate voice and crushing any hope that the characters may have for the future. The severity of reprisals against speaking out gives rise to psychological repression. Ngugi remarks in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* that, “In censorship, the state tries to control the distribution and consumption of the work of art. But when official censorship fails, the state may try to

induce self-censorship through selective acts of terrorism” (*Penpoints* 32). The arrest of Bola and the quelling of the student protests, therefore, serve to warn onlookers that a similar fate awaits them should they attempt to protest.

The prison of the mind: the metaphor of the predetermined text

The state is able to maintain its control over the populace by creating a psychological terror of authority. In exploring this terror that leads to self-censorship, Habila returns over and over to the metaphors of the deterministic story told by a sadistic author, from which his characters cannot escape. As Bola tells Lomba following the student demonstration and preceding his fateful dream foretelling his family’s death on the road to Ibadan, “The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison. Every street out there is crawling with them; the people lock their doors, scared to come out. They play with us, as if we are puppets” (*Waiting* 56). Here the metaphor of the prison and the puppet-text are used simultaneously. If people are scared to come out of their houses, it has as much to do with the overall condition of life under a military regime as it does with specific oppressive acts, but, as Bola expresses it, even the act of going about one’s daily business begins to feel determined.

When Lomba sees his own story that he wrote for the *Dial* magazine acting itself out in the streets of Lagos, he tells the man beside him in the Molue that “there is so much we can’t understand because we are only characters in a story and our horizon is so narrow and so dark” (119). This is only one example of the frustration expressed by characters throughout the novel with the feeling of being “puppets,” being “in prison,” being “in chains.” These metaphors imply the existential frustration of what Lomba recognizes as

living in a story told for them by tyrant, a story in which they seem to have no say in the direction of their lives. In the novel, there is no clear delineation between what the characters choose and what is destined for them. When Lomba and his friends wander away from the tour of the slave port “depressed by the guide’s mournful and vivid description of how the chains and mouth locks had been used on the slaves,” they stumble across the ambiguous figure of the marabout (46). It is as if they stray from one story of slavery to another. Since the marabout is able to divine the future, he implies that the characters are indeed caught in a story told for them. As stated in the introduction, the rest of the novel ripples outward from the meeting of Lomba, Bola, and their unnamed friend with the marabout. His prophetic ability is mirrored over and over again by other characters who have prophetic presentiments, dreams, and ultimately write their own interpretation of history into being. The marabout interprets the state of reality: “Life is like a wave motion, full of highs and lows. We sit on life’s shores with our hands open, waiting to receive. But the water knows, more than we do, what we need and what we don’t need” (46).

The marabout implies that the water is a state of destiny in which we have little choice but to wait. The rhythmic movement of the tide is a powerful force, connected to the movement of the heavens that relentlessly moves lives along in its current. In the short story “The Iron Gate” from *Prison Stories*, the desperate job seekers’

longing to get in [to the oil company gates] ... will become unbearable, and like a mighty wave breaking on the shore, they will throw themselves at the yawning, beckoning space, moaning with a million unnamed longings, only to be forced back again by the gate closing. Then they will stare at this huge iron barrier, their eyes will desperately measure its towering barbed-wire height, as if in readiness to scale it. After a while the wild glow will leave their eyes to be replaced by a look of utter dejection, their shoulders will slump under the weight of their despair... And the melee will form again as another car passes. They are like puppets in the hands of a mad and ruthless puppeteer. (*Prison Stories* 124)

Just as Bola stated earlier of the military regime, “They play with us, as if we are puppets” (*Waiting* 56), these men are tossed back and forth on the waves. The iron gates represent not merely the physical barrier between the men and their jobs, they represent the obstacle placed before them by the military. Their dreams are firmly halted by the physical presence of the army in everyday life, until their very existence seems to hang on the constant promise of a transition through the gate of the military wall and into the “paradise” of democracy. The repetitious promise and denial, the seeming wave motion of fate as determined by the military, is torture. The men “slump under the weight of their despair” (*Prison Stories* 124), but they seem to be given no choice but to rush again for the gate whenever the military decides “what [they] need and what [they] don’t need” (*Waiting* 46).

The uneasy presentiments of evil that Lomba has frequently, Bola’s dreams, the marabout’s prophecies reinforce the idea that they are living in a prearranged tragic text—the story determined by the totalitarian tendencies of the military state. Okonkwo’s statement about “‘the dream’ of independence becom[ing] a nightmare” references Lomba’s statement to Kela “Here in this country our dreams are never realized; something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare” (167).⁸ These nightmares, like the marabout’s prophecies, seem to foreshadow a pre-arranged text: When Lomba’s roommate Bola wakes up after a nightmare about “Dead bodies. Fire....,” Lomba soothes him and resists telling him that he too “had a strong presentiment of something dark and scary lurking in the shadows, inching its way to the forestage of our lives” (54). Having felt the horror since the day before when Bola was enthusiastically describing the student boycott that would take place on the morrow, Lomba eventually finds that Bola’s dream of fire and bodies had been

true— in real life they died “just like that” (62) Lomba imagines the accident as part of a story told on black and white film: “[j]ust before the credits, I saw the truck, close-up, in the centre of the road, the small family car coalesced to its exposed bowels. The blood, in black and white, was not red but black. Thick and viscous. At last the creature had come out to take a bow. Fade to black and chaos” (71). The wreck with the military truck has a choreographed quality. The “creature” lurking in the shadows is the puppeteer that Bola had envisioned. Because the military’s presence takes a toll on the day-to-day life of ordinary citizens as well as that of the outspoken demonstrators, even non-political characters like Bola’s family are caught up in violence. The military abandons their accident in the middle of the road, just as they abandon other broken down aspects of the infrastructure. This neglect has effects far beyond the initial break down. In the accumulated horror of the moment, it seems to Lomba that rather than just the tragic result of military carelessness, the family’s accident has been planned by a sadistic director who bows in acknowledgement as the credits roll. In Lomba’s imagination they are living in stories, not of their own creation, but of a reality defined by the military. The story imprisons and enslaves them.

NOTES:

¹ While I am using the lyrics from the lead track “Jaga Jaga” of Eedris Abdulkareem’s 2004 album *Jaga Jaga* to illustrate the prison-status of the country under a military regime as described in Habila’s novel, Abdulkareem is, in fact, critiquing the state of affairs under the post-military Obasanjo government, providing a fascinating continuum from Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s lyrics blasting Obasanjo military regime of the late 1970s in albums like *Coffin for Head of State* or *I.T.T.*

² As the 1994 Human Rights Watch report on Nigeria in 1993 notes, “Nigeria, which began the year with promise of a presidential election [under Babangida], ended the year with the stark reality of the return of military dictatorship and the abolition of all democratic institutions” (HRW par. 1). In *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*, Eghosa E. Osaghae gives a detailed account of the events leading up to the Abacha coup.

³ I talk more about this episode in Chapter Five of my thesis.

⁴ It seems significant that the only story in the collection that directly references Western exploitation of Nigeria is left out of the novel published in London and New York.

⁵ This sentiment of communal despair is noted in other literature contemporary to Abacha’s regime. Hausa novelist Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino opens his 1996 novel *Kaico!* with a meditation on government failures, which foreshadow the disasters that unfold throughout the rest of the novel. It also subtly points a finger at an incompetent government:

“*Anya jama’a*, is it possible to keep living like this, as the very life is being squeezed out of us? Every day, prices climb higher and higher. Times have changed, so that now it is every man for himself... Everyone just looks out for himself and his children. No one bothers to help his relatives or neighbors anymore.... The education and public health systems have collapsed. The government schools don’t have enough qualified teachers. They don’t have enough supplies or work materials. The government hospitals don’t have enough medicine or qualified staff... [T]hugs and robbers and thieves and 419 con-men... are everywhere. If you own a nice car and a lot of money, you can’t sleep at night for fear that thieves will come in the dark and steal them from you. If you are a trader, whenever you travel to another city with money, you can’t rest in peace until you see that you’ve arrived safely and that no armed robbers have attacked you.” (my translation from pages 1-2)

⁶ The name of the student leader is significant on multiple levels. Sankara is a Tiv name and so could “realistically” be the name of a Nigerian student leader; however, most significantly, it reflects the name of the real life Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary populist leader of Burkina Faso from 1983-1987.

⁷ For details on Thomas Sankara, see Samantha Anderson’s *Thomas Sankara speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-87*. Ironically, Sankara instituted a military regime. The difference between Sankara’s revolution and the post-Buhari military regimes, however, is in what Habila, in his “Afterward” to *Waiting for An Angel*, notes as a lack of any kind of guiding vision. “Every day came with new limitations, new prisons. Perhaps some of these limitations would have been endurable if one could have found a moral basis on which to be loyal to the military rulers, if one could somehow have believed in the mission they were set on. (Like the Ghanaians had in the early years of Rawlins [sic], or the Nigerians themselves had in 1984-5 under the regime of General Muhammadu Buhari and Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon). But there was nothing to believe in: the only mission the military rulers had was systematically to loot the national treasury: their only morality was a vicious survivalist agenda in which any hint of disloyalty was ruthlessly crushed” (*Waiting* 224). All the same, one wonders how long Sankara could have maintained a “moral military regime”—whether his death was inevitable to preserve his heroic status.

⁸ Lomba’s statement echoes Ngugi’s statement in the 1998 *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* that “A post-colonial state often crushes those dreams and turns people’s lives into nightmares.... Dreaming becomes a crime of thought and imagination” (20).

**CHAPTER TWO: Lomba as Synecdoche for the Experience of the Nation: the
movement from lethargy to defiance**

If the puppet-show or the predetermined text is such an important metaphor in understanding the psychological control the state has over the populace, then the figure of the writer in the text is an equally important metaphor of resistance. The suffering of the nation under the indirect and direct forms of oppression is metaphorically re-enacted through the life of the writer, Lomba. Lomba becomes a synecdoche for the populace as a whole, modeling the move from lethargy and disillusion to psychological resistance.

The marabout's prediction, during Lomba's early days in Lagos, that he will end up in prison adds to the feeling of determinism that Lomba struggles with the rest of his life—the “strong presentiment of something dark and scary lurking in the shadows, inching its way to the forestage of our lives” (*Waiting* 54). Lomba returns to the university after the tragic accident of Bola's family only to hear further bad news about the soldiers' attack on the campus. Placing the destruction of his writing alongside the violence against the students, including the rape of the female students, reinforces his position as a synecdoche for the nation. The act of violence against his writing demonstrates the regime's intolerance for the alternate perspectives represented by the demonstrating students. Lomba narrates “I felt the imprint of the boots on my mind; I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through my very soul. All I could think of as I stood there, with the torn, mud-caked papers in my hands and around me, was: I have been writing these stories and poems for as long as I can remember now, these are my secret thoughts and dreams” (78). Lomba's dreams for the future that he has written “for as long as he can remember” are crushed, just as the dreams of

the many other characters in the text are crushed. The “imprint of the boots on” his mind, the “rifling, tearing hands rippling through” his soul is on a philosophical level much like the rapes that the female students suffer; it is not merely a physical violation but a loss of dignity that creates a deep wound upon the psyche.¹ The populace living under the military regime in *Waiting for an Angel* has a constant feeling of being compromised.

In the short story “The Iron Gate” this loss of dignity is shown in the desperation of the men trying to get jobs with the oil company that has contributed to the environmental and economic destruction of their country. It is shown in Lomba’s and Kela’s stories of the people of Morgan Street (particularly Brother) humiliated by their poverty. And it is also seen in the descriptions of the multiple women forced into prostitution—which in this novel, at least, is a form of rape so frequent that it has become usual: Hagar and the Mayfair girls, the “vacuous, unmemorable” girl in the bar (*Waiting* 211). Even Auntie Rachel’s employee Nancy who has been left by her lover and goes to find him in a strange city likely faces this fate. These women like Lomba become representative of a country prostrated by the continual abuse of the military.² The constant humiliation causes many of the characters and Lomba, as representative of the whole, to lose their imagination of a better life.

When Lomba tries to write a novel, he writes that the “words and sentences, joined end to end, looked ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table” (*Waiting* 110). While this feeling might reflect an image any blocked writer might experience, in the context of Habila’s novel, the sentences of Lomba’s novel represent a larger national dilemma in which individual dreams are stymied by the presence of the military. Lomba’s editor James Fiki tells him “One General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular

details of their wretchedness. They've lost all faith in the government's unending transition programmes. Write on that.... the general disillusionment, the lethargy" (113). The lethargy James commissions Lomba to write about in his article is, in fact, reflected in Lomba's own life, in which he wonders if he should "return to bed, take an overdose of Valium and sleep.... You are forgotten in the stymied sense-dulling miasma of existence. And you lie there dead, or simply hibernating. It is as if you never really were" (110). The writer Lomba becomes like those "winos" he writes of in his essay who "pass the day in vinous slumber" (117); like Kela's Auntie Rachael who locks herself in a dark room with a bottle of whisky waiting for God's will to be done, like the multiple other characters in the novel who keep their desperation from becoming madness by emptying their minds. Such living death empties both the population and the writer of revolutionary impulse.

When Lomba resists writing an article about a political demonstration because of his affiliation with the arts page, his editor James reminds him that he cannot hope to publish a novel in a country where "it would be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and army to read" (194).³ The conditions of literature are tied directly to the conditions of the environment in which he is living, and in a state in which Lomba cannot even hope to apply for the Commonwealth prize even if he does find a publisher because Nigeria was just thrown out of the Commonwealth, writing for the sake of writing becomes futile. "You can't write with chains on your hands" James tells him (195).⁴ In an even more dramatic illustration, James takes him to the slave museum in Badagry:

“It was in the ships that the mouthlocks were used, so that they couldn’t console each other and rally their spirits and thereby revolt. To further discourage communication, no two persons of the same language were kept together. Mandingo was chained to Yoruba, Wolof was chained to Ibo, Bini was chained to Hausa. You see every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there’ll be revolt.” (198)

The oppressor, therefore, must suppress alternate perspectives or risk losing control.

If the current state reflects on a large scale the imprisonment of the slaves, then the hopelessness caused by poverty and repression metaphorically reflects the physical mouthlocks that kept the slaves from speaking to each other. According to James, the inability to communicate with each other was part of the reason there was little revolt among the slaves. Similarly Lomba’s attempt to escape and seal himself off in the world of his own fiction, as he does for two years, when the university “began to look like prison” (112), only imprisons him further. Part of the problem Lomba is having with his novel is that he has alienated himself from his community. His description of his life on Morgan Street makes it clear that he has very few close acquaintances. The woman who runs the school preparatory class he teaches for “always looked at me suspiciously, as if wondering what I did for a living” (110). His closest neighbors are a prostitute and a thief, and his contact with them is limited to glimpses and brief conversations. When he considers overdosing on Valium, he thinks “Nobody would miss you—they never really do, do they?... You are forgotten in the stymied, sense-dulling miasma of existence” (110). His lack of community contributes to the despair of living under economic and political repression.

Lomba’s reawakening comes through his interaction with the activist and writer Joshua and the *Dial*’s editor James, who remind him of the necessity of going beyond a focus on self to the larger grappling with the political. “Everything is politics in this

country,” James tells him (118). You cannot be an artist, he tells him, without engaging in politics. Lomba’s placement as an “arts page” journalist does not exempt him from writing about political events. What James implies here and what Lomba gradually discovers is that if oppression can be divided into indirect environmental oppression and into direct violent suppression, then it can also be divided into physical and psychological oppression. While neither the writer nor the inhabitants of the nation have much power to effectively resist the oppression of the military on a physical level, they do have the ability to resist the terror on a psychological level.

If Lomba’s journey is metaphoric for the journey of the nation, then his awakening from lethargy to resistance models a vision for the reawakening of the nation to the possibility of resistance. After a meeting with Joshua, James tells him,

We are all in this together. That young man: I saw the doubt and uncertainty and fear in his eyes; of course he knows that in our country there cannot be a peaceful demonstration, the troops will always come, there will be gunshots, and perhaps deaths. He knows that, I am sure, but he is still willing to do it. The time has come when a few bruises, even deaths, don’t matter any more. That’s why I think you should go [to the demonstration]. To encourage him and show him he is not alone. (195)

James implies here that the demonstration, of itself, will not accomplish a great political transformation. Joshua himself acknowledges this to Kela when he sighs over Ojikutu/Mao’s forcing of the demonstration, “That romantic fool.... He’ll get us all killed. He doesn’t know what desperate people he is up against” (162). However, as James notes, Joshua is still willing to do it. This willingness in the face of “doubt and uncertainty and fear” (195) is the beginning of a change in the movement from individual fantasy, as Arjun Appadurai notes, to social imagination (Appadurai 6). By reporting about the community demonstration for the *Dial*, Lomba will not only encourage those participating in the

demonstration but will show others around the country that such resistance is taking place. The significance of Lomba's attending the demonstration is not so much one that will make much difference to the regime being protested but one that will make a difference to the others at the demonstration: in being able to "encourage," in being able to show the leader Joshua and others at demonstration that they are "not alone" (*Waiting* 195). Lomba's movement from focus on self, as represented by his solitary confinement to his novel, to focus on others, as represented by his expansion into journalism, charts the necessary movement others in the nation must take if they hope for change.

At the same time, Habila's choice to make this synecdochic character a writer has great significance. The writer and artist, as James shows Lomba, models a psychological resistance in writing which can be communicated to others. If Lomba is going to the demonstration to show Joshua that "he is not alone," he does it through his physical presence and also by his promise to write about the demonstration for publication (195). The writer has an expressive power, which can transfer vision he has found through interaction with others to an even wider audience. The importance of the writer in linking together a wider audience is reflected in the form of *Waiting for an Angel*. While Lomba appears in every chapter of the novel, he is at times, as Francis King notes, "the brightly lit focal point" and in other chapters "merely... a small shadowy presence sketched in at the edge" (King 2). Lomba's role as a writer is what links all of these stories together: in some he is the main character, in others he is merely an observer. The trajectory of his actions also plays out on a small scale the actions that are repeated over and over again the actions performed by other characters.

The necessity of action:

The title of the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, initially seems to reinforce the necessity of an existential patience. However as the novel progresses, it seems to question the idea that one must simply wait to accept whatever life gives you. The actions of the characters throughout the novel reinforce the necessity of acting—not waiting.

Lomba's determination to cover the demonstration despite the likelihood that the military will come requires a certain amount of desperate defiance, a defiance that is modeled and echoed by other members of the community. The desperate creative acts performed by these characters in the face of despair, echo the acts of the Yoruba god Ogun, as theorized by Soyinka in "The Fourth Stage" (*Art* 27-39). Their willful rebellion, while on one level seemingly futile, is on another level the action on which hope can be built. In this way, even Bola's "mad" repetition of Sankara's words in the market-place is meaningful. Eze claims that Bola's performance is an active decision to act: "The question is not so much about the rationality of his act as it is about the fact that he decides to overcome his lethargy" (103). His very madness indicates a certain amount of freedom, as Ngugi claims, "to ask any questions even of the most taboo and sacred. A mad person... can utter anything, ask any questions, and even link different situations" (*Penpoints* 19). Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary from Burkina Faso whom Habila appropriates in his character of the student leader, states:

You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. Besides, it took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. We must dare to invent the future. (Sankara 144)

Dreams and the imagination are the flip side to madness. The state may intend to create lethargy, an impotent madness that saps any energy for resistance from the people, but when imbued with a sense of will, as Bola does, it becomes an energizing force. The plunging into the abyss is a powerful act of reinterpretation.

Waiting for the Angels: Action inspired by community

Earlier I compared the loss of dignity that Lomba experiences through the soldier's rifling through his writing, "his secret thoughts and dreams" (*Waiting* 78) to the descriptions of the multiple women forced into prostitution. If Lomba's movement from despair to a defiance inspired by his interaction with community members is metaphoric for the possibilities of the nation, then the actions of the various lesser developed women of the community can also be read as significant for the movement from passive submission to an active resistance. The women do not come from similar backgrounds, neither do they act with a unified purpose, yet their actions provide examples of the possibilities available to the nation. Alice, the daughter of the general, is paralleled in her helplessness to the character of Hagar the prostitute. They are both forced into prostitution. When Alice's father marries a new wife and abandons his daughter and her dying mother, Alice is forced into her relationship with "Uncle" Ngai, a wealthy older man, to pay for her mother's chemotherapy. Alice is trapped in a "gilded cage," and arguably she is much better off than a "common" prostitute, but her forced relationship with Ngai is similar to Hagar's desperate fall into prostitution. Just as the hospital bills and even the payment for the dress she wears trap Alice into a life with Ngai, Hagar is trapped in the Mayfair Hotel behind the "window in a wall with iron bars through which the barman passed out bottles of beer and collected money"

(149). Ironically, while the general's daughter Alice is "not a serious student" (88), Hagar had been "a brilliant student. The best in her class" (150). And while Alice is able to finish university before her father abandons her, Hagar is forced to drop out of the university when her mother throws her out of the house. When her former teacher Joshua finds her again, Hagar, like the bottles of beer, is passed back and forth through the bars to quench men's sexual thirst in exchange for money. Although, like Alice, she is in love with a writer and intellectual, she refuses to leave prostitution to be with him because she is afraid to ruin his reputation. In response to her choices, Joshua tells Kela "Never condemn a man or give up on him because of the road he has chosen—because sometimes it is actually the road that chose him. People can change. People do change" (151). Once again, we find the reference to living in a story told by someone else. But in this case, unlike Alice, Hagar does finally decide to act, to "change," when she leads the other girls from the Mayfair Hotel to the demonstration that Joshua has organized.

In comparing Hagar to Alice, we might say that it is even Alice's privileged background and her separation from community that has deprived her of the imagination necessary to act—she seems to be waiting throughout the space given her in the novel: waiting for Ngai to come pick her up from the hospital, waiting for her mother to die, and finally, as Lomba interprets it, waiting for her lover to come back and save her from her loveless marriage. If we read Habila's poem "Superman" intertextually with the novel, we find a man lamenting that Alice has made him a superhero, a designation that he cannot live up to. The Alice of the poem launches the poet into flight, and the Alice of the novel waits for Lomba's rescue ("Poems" 159-160).

On the other hand, Hagar's final action, while proclaiming her love and trust of Joshua, is meant to join him in his protest, not send him off by himself. It is this decision, this grasping of agency, that makes her the much more relevant character.⁵ Despite their miserable situation and the animosity between them and the other women of Morgan Street, the arrival of Hagar and the other Mayfair girls can be read as another reference to angels: the description of their coming echoes the salvific motif of nature and water that runs throughout the novel: "They were like drops of soothing rain on the dry, brittle atmosphere." Just as the arrival of Alice's picture brings hope to Lomba in prison, when Joshua sees Hagar "[a] quick transformation came over him, and from then till the end of the day, everything he did was sure and decisive. There was almost a swagger to his steps.... The crowd kept quiet; everyone seemed to notice the sudden decisiveness in Joshua's every move" (*Waiting* 172).

In a challenge to the deterministic ideology inherent in "waiting" (and my initial interpretation of the marabout's words of merely "waiting to receive"), Joshua proclaims to the Sole Administrator, "We, the honest, peace-loving and taxpaying citizens of Morgan Street, are tired of waiting for the government to come to us. That's why we came. We came to tell you..." (173). Ironically, it was not until Hagar's arrival that Joshua felt this purpose. The paradoxical need for action in the face of despair is repeated again in this story. The marabout "waits to receive" the stories of other shores, yet his telling of the future, enables the students to act out against their fate. Hagar is killed by a hit and run driver immediately after the demonstration, yet it is her action that gives Joshua the energy to continue the protest. Nancy, the girl who works for Kela's aunt, waits for her lover to return, but finally takes matters into her own hands and goes to look for him. Although her action is most

likely futile, and although Habila suggests that she will end up in prostitution, just as Hagar has, the ending of her story remains ambiguous, hopeful. Kela defies his fears that her search will be futile and willfully imagines a happy ending for her, “I pictured her seated by the roadside on a bench, with Mark in her lap, tired of searching and looking into every face that passed, hoping to see Her Man. No. This picture was too dismal. I didn’t want Nancy ever to be in such a situation. So one of the passers-by would pause after passing, he’d look back. ‘Nancy is it you?’ It was Her Man” (158).

Similarly, Lomba waits for freedom in his prison cell, and that chance at freedom ironically comes in the form of the prison superintendent’s girlfriend Janice, whom he has called through the act of writing. Kela’s Auntie Rachel names her restaurant “Godwill” as a “prayer which vacillated between a golden past and a dark unhappy future: Godwill return my past with all its joys and promises; Godwill not. He will do whatever He feels like doing, which is mostly destruction of dreams and hopes” (147). She sits waiting for God’s will, drinking whisky behind dark curtains, yet after the protest, she takes action. “When the policemen came and knocked on her door looking for food to buy, she looked at them as if surprised by the request, and replied cryptically, ‘I thought you people didn’t need food and water like the rest of us’” (182). Hagar’s decision to act has seemingly set off a chain reaction of decisions to act, and it is only after this moment of defiance against the hungry policemen that Auntie Rachel throws out the whisky bottles and moth-eaten mementos of a treasured past. God may do what he will, but she is now taking responsibility for her own dreams and hopes.

The marabout’s story seems to demonstrate the seeming contradiction that the knowledge of the end of the story gives the power to subvert that story; the future has no

hold over the actor. It is his knowledge of the arrival of the angel of death, that gives the protagonist of this chapter the courage to resist the soldiers and to feel that “[h]is death had meaning” (49). Likewise, the reader knows the ambiguous “end” of Lomba’s story from the first chapter of the novel, yet it is not the end that matters; it is the actions performed in *media res* by the many characters who have come into contact with Lomba during his life. The meaning of the novel is in the exploration of the multiple stories, of which the marabout speaks, that wash back and forth with the tide. Although Lomba is the link that connects these stories together, he is not the Protagonist with a capital “P.” His story is merely one among many; as writer he just writes them down. It is this multiplicity of perspectives, the ocean of stories, that cause the binaries defined by the prison state to drift apart. If the state’s ultimate weapon, “death, is not an end but a beginning,” then the state’s attempt to control the nation depends not on its ability to inflict imprisonment and death but on its ability to instill fear. If the poet can transcend the fear of imprisonment and death, then she can open up “another surface, another air.” Ironically, it is the absolutism of brutality seen in the slave irons that gives Lomba the courage to write. He tells the boy Kela “Here in this country our dreams are never realized; something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare.” However, despite the hegemony of the prison-state that twists the dreams of the people into nightmares, Lomba realizes “that should not stop us from dreaming” (167). The boy repeats to Lomba the words of his teacher Joshua: “People become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don’t know what is real until they begin to dream” (121).⁶

NOTES:

¹ In *Climate of Fear*, Wole Soyinka notes that the fear invoked by the rapist or terrorist “induces a degree of loss of self-apprehension: a part of one’s self has been appropriated, a level of consciousness, and this may even lead to a reduction in one’s self-esteem—in short a loss of inner dignity” (*Climate* 8). The soldiers’ desecration of Lomba’s writing foreshadows the experiences he will have in the actual prison later on in life, when his secrets letters, journals, and love poems that enable him to survive the prison are stolen by the prison superintendent.

² Okey Ndibe’s novel, *Arrows of Rain*, which Christopher Okonkwo closely links to Habila’s novel, relates the rape victim and the prostitute even more closely. The soldier Isa Pallat Bello, who later becomes the military head of state, foreshadows the rape of the country in his rape and murder of the prostitute Iyese, who is also the lover of the journalist Ogugua. Ogugua driven mad by fear of his former rival’s power, goes into self-exile on the beaches, where twenty years later he hears the systematic rape of prostitutes by soldiers. Isa Pallat Bello’s abuses have multiplied under his reign of terror. As Okonkwo notes of the rape of prostitutes in *Arrows of Rain*, “The rape of the prostitute translates the woman’s body as a text upon which the army’s prostitution and power-driven, violent penetrations of the national body are inscribed” (par. 9). The women are exploited as part of the story that defines the oppressor’s ownership of the nation—their individual stories are lost in the soldiers’ definition of them as bodies to be used as an illustration of military power.

³ As Ngugi notes, the restless changing motion of art is automatically in conflict with the controlling attempts of the state to maintain a motionless status quo (*Penpoints* 12-13).

⁴ This sentiment is also reflected in 1999 collection of short stories published by the Association of Nigerian Authors. The editor of the volume Ibrahim Sheme notes that “[T]he unending economic and political depression facing the country, confounded by a pitiable lack of vision on priorities such as the active promotion of literacy and reading, have made the individual writer’s prospect of getting published a task much easier than the proverbial camel passing through the eye of a needle” (Sheme 7).

⁵ Perhaps some of Alice’s inactivity in the novel is because she seems to be, quite literally, an afterthought. The story of Alice was added to the *Waiting for an Angel*, but did not appear in the original *Prison Stories*.

⁶ The marabout foretold the imprisonment of Lomba and the death of his friend, but in his words about the sea, he implies that there are multiple realities. Under the sea, there is “another surface, another air” (*Waiting* 47). Death is a new beginning. And in dreaming, it might just be possible to find that new story—to change the direction of the future to the alternate reality that lies waiting under the sea. When Lomba is imprisoned in an actual prison with walls and bars, he finds that “each day survived is a victory against the jailer, a blow struck for freedom” (15). Just surviving under the brutality is a form of defiance.

CHAPTER THREE: The Imagination as Tool: Undermining the oppressor's walls

In the first chapter, I looked at how Habila's fiction reflects actual kinds of physical and psychological oppression that took place in Nigeria. In the second chapter, I also examined how Lomba's experience reflected on a small scale the larger suffering of the nation and the necessity of action. While Lomba's presence as writer is the link that weaves together every story (whether he is on the periphery or at the centre) the choice of writer for synecdoche of the nation is seen the most clearly in the first chapter of the novel, in which his imprisonment is symbolic for the imprisonment of the entire nation under military rule. If Lomba's life while in the prison-state of Nigeria reinforces the necessity of community involvement in the move from lethargy to resistance, then his life behind the walls of an actual prison symbolically demonstrates the power of the imagination in undermining the psychological hold the prison creates over him, as well as demonstrating the power of the imaginative form to breach the prison walls and create new possibilities. Lomba's position as a writer is significant not only in his ability to connect the community together, as I established in Chapter Two, but also in his ability to wield the imagination as tool of resistance. Continuing in the extended metaphor set up at the beginning of my thesis, if living in the prison state or the actual prison is like living in a story told by a dictator, the writer is a powerful symbolic figure in "rewriting" that story. By deconstructing the language used by the dictator and reforming it to his own purposes, the writer uses language and form to escape the control of the dictator and to imagine new possibilities beyond the bounds of the dictator's text. The flaw of the scenario determined by the oppressor is that of predictability, lack of imagination; this is a flaw that the writer can take advantage of.

I ended the last chapter focused on the necessity of communal defiance in the face of despair. In prison, Lomba finds the lethargy and madness that threaten him both in his room on Morgan/ “Poverty” Street in the larger realm of the prison-state and in his literal prison-cell can be overcome through the willed resistance of writing. In the first journal entry in his prison cell, Lomba writes:

Today, I begin a diary, to say all the things I want to say, to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself. It stops me from standing in the centre of this narrow cell and screaming at the top of my voice. It stops me from jumping up suddenly and bashing my head repeatedly against the wall. Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice.

I express myself. I let my mind soar above these walls to bring back distant, exotic bricks with which I seek to build a more endurable cell within this cell. Prison. Misprison. Dis. Un. Prisoner. See? I write of my state in words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality. (*Waiting* 14)

Earlier James had shown Lomba how the slavers had used mouthlocks to keep the enslaved people from consoling each other. The imprisonment of the writer serves the same purpose, as Lomba notes, serving not so much to chain “hands and feet as it does your voice” (14). By locking up the writer, he is kept from consoling or being consoled, much less rallying an audience for protest. In prison, Lomba finds that perhaps James’s claim that “[y]ou can’t write with chains on your hands” (195), does not apply in all situations. Perhaps writing is the only way to maintain some semblance of agency, of “voice,” in the literal prison—even if the only audience available is an imaginary one. Lomba’s prison writing serves the dual purpose of keeping him sane and transforming his prison walls into imaginative props for resistance.¹ Lomba’s imprisonment is a literal reflection of his earlier feeling of being “locked in this room, in this tenement house” on Morgan Street. But while his writing on Morgan Street seemed to imprison him, “[t]he words and sentences, joined end to end,

looked ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table” (110), here his writing serves as a means of liberation. First, the writing helps to discipline his mind and keep him from giving into madness: “screaming at the top of my voice” or “bashing my head repeatedly against the wall” (14). Second, similar to the marabout, he imaginatively deconstructs his prison through word games, “Prison. Misprison. Dis. Un. Prisoner.” By taking apart the language of prison, he mentally “reduces the weight of these walls on my shoulders,” allowing his mind to “soar above these walls.” Although he acknowledges his physical imprisonment, his imaginative rebuilding of the walls with “exotic bricks” of his own choosing, often from other poems memorized, other texts remembered, allows him to reclaim his “nullified individuality” (14). This imaginative resistance, the use of his mind, and his writing ability ultimately results in a physical breach of the prison walls, when the unsuspecting prison superintendent carries his poems to the outside world.

Ambiguity between the real and imagined

As initially illustrated in Lomba’s deconstruction of the prison walls, Habila creates ambiguities between what is “reality” and what is “imagined,” throughout the novel. The first chapter is told through the alternating perspectives of Lomba, through his diary, and an unnamed biographer. The details of prison life that are not told in Lomba’s own words are speculatively recreated by his biographer. Of Lomba’s love poems, the biographer states, “Some were his original compositions rewritten from memory, but a lot were fresh creations—tortured sentimental effusions to women he had known and admired, and perhaps loved. Of course they might have been imaginary beings, fabricated in the smithy of his prison-fevered mind” (16). This ambiguity between poems memorized and created, women

known and imagined, becomes further complicated when the remembered and imagined women materialize, like the angel to Peter in the Biblical book of Acts, to lead him out of his prison cell. One of Lomba's old lovers, Alice, appears in the prison through a tattered newspaper photograph of her at her wedding. The photograph allows his past life to break into his current imprisoned condition—Even though Alice is marrying an older man for money, “the eyes [in the photograph] ... gave him more hope. They told him all he needed to know: that Alice still loved him” (85). Her searching expression convinces him that “it was him she sought” (86), and provides him with the memories of her “feverish kiss” (107) the last time they met—memories that inspire the love poetry through which he imaginatively escapes the prison.

That Lomba's salvation, which manifests itself in the appearance of women from his imagination, comes through love poems is significant. First, the poems are a way of sneaking past the prison superintendent, who thinks they are harmless. Second, they are a way of connecting with an audience, even if it is only in his imagination. Lomba's poems written in prison become subversive claims of resistance against and power over the prison superintendent. Lomba soon finds that his imagination gives him power over his jailer. He recognizes his first opening when the superintendent brings back the love poems that had been confiscated during the raid. The man tells him: “The letters, illegal. I burned them. Prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But the poems are harmless. Love poems” (26). The prison superintendent assumes that love poems are safe. Although letters that contain direct or concealed political content might embarrass the government, the jailor does not imagine that love poems might have that same potential. In fact, he believes that he can use love poems for his own benefit.

Although the jailor attempts to use Lomba for his own purposes, Lomba's knowledge of the jailor's assumptions and desires allows him to exploit those assumptions. Because his gift of expression is one that the jailor desires, Lomba is given a glimpse beyond the façade the prison superintendent attempts to maintain. This knowledge of the superintendent's vulnerability gives Lomba an intellectual and psychological power over him. When the jailor first brings him one of his poems to read, Lomba writes "After the first stanza I saw that it was a thinly veiled imitation of one of my poems. I sensed his waiting. He was hardly breathing. I let him wait. Lord, I can't remember another time when I had felt so good. So powerful" (27). As the more thoughtful poet, Lomba is able to imagine himself in the position of the great poet Samuel Johnson looming over "an aspiring poet waiting anxiously for my verdict" (27). His interaction with the superintendent who wants something from him gives him a certain amount of superiority, at the same time as it allows him to imagine himself as a poet in another time and place, outside of the bounds of the physical prison. By sending his poems through the prison bars to the superintendent's girlfriend, Lomba is able to both imagine his gaoler in a less threatening mode and use his own superior intellect to smuggle messages out of prison.

The privileging of the imagination is key here. It is the prison superintendent's lack of imagination that makes him appropriate Lomba's poetry, oblivious to the possibility that Janice might fall in love with the real poet rather than his gaoler. He cannot imagine that Lomba might use the love poems as a way to escape. This failure of imagination is the fatal weakness of the prison superintendent. From the moment that Muftau reveals his vulnerable side, Lomba takes full advantage of the superintendent's desire to impress. Much like Lomba's neighbor on Morgan Street, the illiterate thief Nkem, who had attempted to impress

Lomba with his English, Muftau attempts to impress Lomba with his knowledge of poetry: “Perhaps because I work in prison. I wear uniform. You think I don’t know poetry, eh? Soyinka, Okigbo, Shakespeare” (26). Although Lomba cannot express the sarcasm that comes to his lips when he reads Muftau’s first poem, he expresses it in the poems he writes for the superintendent’s educated lady-love. Muftau does not know poetry, but the teacher he wants to marry does. The superintendent’s claim to literacy also unintentionally supplies Lomba with his form of resistance: the first letters of “Soyinka, Okigbo, and Shakespeare” form a perfect “SOS.” Lomba appropriates lines and whole poems from other poets to send to Janice. He slyly undermines the superintendent’s intentional plagiarism by supplying him with already “plagiarized” materials, to act as messages to the educated woman the prison superintendent loves. He appropriates lines from Edgar Allen Poe, John Donne, and the Greek poet Sappho, but their words of love become “scriptive Morse tucked innocently into the lines of the poems” (33).² Janice later tells him that she recognized the SOS in the repetition of the line, “Save my soul, a prisoner,” that ran through his poems. The love poetry is turned to a new political and practical purpose. The literary symbol becomes actualized—he is an actual prisoner, not merely a metaphoric one.

The SOS refrain is one of Lomba’s more obvious literary devices, but his use of intertextuality within the poems themselves works both as a way for Lomba to snatch at lines of poetry that lie, like the stars and the rain, beyond the reach of the prison and as a sly indication of Muftau’s inability to write such poetry. Muftau’s blindness to the obvious allusions in the poems that Lomba intentionally plagiarizes points to his stupid deceit. However, the “plagiarism” of classic poems works not just to mock the prison superintendent but to say the things Lomba cannot directly communicate without being

discovered. In Lomba's "bowdlerization of Sappho's 'Ode'" (31) the superintendent does not see beyond the conventions of love poetry. He does not imagine that Lomba is writing anything but what he asked him to write: "'A peer of goddesses she seems to me.' Yes. Excellent. She will be happy. Do you think I should ask her for. Marriage. Today?" (33). What the superintendent does not know is that in other translations of Sappho, the poet speaks of a rival who sits beside the beloved, hearing her laughter and her voice. The author of the poem stands at a distance from the couple, unable to reach the desired lady whose attention is turned to the rival, except through the poem. This reflects Lomba's own position. Whereas J. Addington Symonds (as well as other translators) translates the poem so that the author addresses the beloved, indicating jealousy of the man who sits so close that he "...in silence hears thee/ Silverly speaking, /Laughing love's low laughter..." (Symonds 69), Lomba bowdlerizes the poem so that the seeming "author" of the poem is the man sitting "face to face" with her, who is entranced by "listening to the sweet tones of my voice, / And the loveliness of my laughing. /It is this that sets my heart fluttering / In my chest," (*Waiting* 32). This beginning of the poem points ironically to the self absorption of the prison superintendent who imagines the tones of his choppy voice "sweet," and his laughter "lovely," just as he imagines his own poetry "great," and that he is making Lomba "comfortable" in prison by giving him cigarettes (41). However, following this initial ironic hint, the poem transitions to another set of imagery, which points to the true author of the poem. As with the Sappho, the author of the poem is not the arrogant man who sits "face to face" with Janice, but the one who waits in agonies in the dark. The last nine lines of the poem, like the refrain of "Save my soul, a prisoner," work to reflect Lomba's true position as a prisoner:

I am no longer master of my voice,
 And my tongue lies useless
 And a delicate flame runs over my skin
 No more do I see with my eyes;
 The sweat pours down me
 I am all seized with trembling
 And I grow paler than the grass
 My strength fails me
 And I seem little short of dying. (32)

Here Lomba demonstrates the powerful potential of the love poetry Muftau thinks “harmless.” Using the conventions of love poetry in which the lover often seems helpless and in thrall to the beloved, Lomba reflects the literality of his own imprisonment. Read one way, the poem reflects the metaphoric imprisonment of the gaoler within the structures of his own conceit; in another way, the poem describes Lomba’s own experiences in prison. The two lines, “I am no longer master of my voice, /And my tongue lies useless” (32), reflect his observations in his diary that “[p]rison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice” (14). The master of Lomba’s voice, indeed, is now the man who gives Janice the poem. “The delicate flame” (32) on his skin can also be read as the “acid, cancer” of anger “eating away your bowels in the dark” (15). And if the “lover” claims that “No more do I see with my eyes” (32) then no more can Lomba see in solitary confinement where after removing his blindfold, “the darkness remained the same” (24). As with any prisoner in a Lagos prison, “the sweat pours down me,” and if he is “seized with trembling” (32) it is like the inmate whose “hands shook, as if with a life of their own” (15) whose “strength fail[ed]” (32) him and who “collapsed into [Lomba’s] arms” (16) crying that “[i]f I go back there I’ll die” (15). The cry of the lover is the cry of the prisoner longing to be free.

If the love poem is powerful as a disguise for a more political reality, it is also powerful because it is a form that allows the imprisoned poet to reach out beyond his solitude to an audience that is both real and imagined. His imagination allows him not just to sneak his poems through the prison walls, but also to imagine liberation for himself. Lomba's metaphoric "message[s] in a bottle, thrown without much hope into the sea" (39), recall the words of the marabout who had once predicted Lomba's future in prison: "The water ... takes away from us what we don't need, and drops it at another shore where it is needed. Sometimes it returns to us what it took away, refined and augmented with brine and other sea minerals" (47). If read alongside the story in which Lomba's poems are taken away from him by the prison superintendent and returned to him by Janice, the passage implies not just destiny but also agency. It is not that the superintendent merely "took" Lomba's love poems from him, but that Lomba intended them as "messages." His intended audience was not necessarily Janice but "myself, perhaps, written by me to my own soul, to every other soul, the collective soul of the universe" (38). Lomba's use of the imagination is a defiant act of will: writing alone in prison, he imagines an audience for himself. The task of writing for the superintendent's intended eventually gives him a corporeal presence to connect to his imagined audience. When the prison superintendent first tells Lomba that he gave Janice one of Lomba's poems, Lomba imagines the superintendent's rendezvous with her at a Chinese Restaurant. In his imagination Janice is reluctant to become involved with the man. He imagines that "[s]ometimes she is at loss what to make of his attentions. She sighs. She turns her plump face to the deep, blue lagoon. A white boat with dark stripes on its sides speeds past; a figure is crouched inside, almost invisible" (29). The poem "Three Words" that the superintendent later pulls out to give her is a poem Lomba had initially

written before the raid that landed him in solitary confinement. The nearly invisible person crouched inside the boat that Janice saw earlier seems to become significant—the fleeting presence of the author of the poem, like that hidden almost invisible poet in the Sappho. That a seemingly futile poem meant only for himself had actually reached an audience indicates the power of Lomba's imagination. When Lomba meets Janice, he finds that “my mental image of her was almost accurate. She was plump. Her face was warm and homely” (36). It is as if his imagination has brought her to life, his SOS poems that he sent out into the world through the unlikely courier of the prison superintendent “written by me to my own soul, to every other soul, the collective soul of the universe” had been found and brought back. He had dreamed his way out of the prison bars, and had reeled in one of the text's many angels, who pulls his poems out of her purse and gives them back to him.

Just as the marabout notes that which is lost will sometimes be returned “refined and augmented with brine and other sea minerals” (47), Janice gives him the knowledge that his messages have actually been received and interpreted. She also brings with her knowledge of Muftau that further undermines his power over Lomba. Furthermore, she is able to use her “love” as a weapon with which to threaten Muftau: “I want you to contact these people. [Amnesty International] Give them his name. If you can't do that, then forget you ever knew me” (42). Although the novel ends with some ambiguity about whether Muftau actually does anything else to help Lomba, Janice's intervention indicates a hopeful end to the story. Like an angel with a prophetic message of comfort, she tells Lomba,

‘You'll not die. You'll get out alive. One day it will all be over,’ she said. Her perfume, mixed with her female smell, rose into my nostrils: flowery, musky. I had forgotten the last time a woman had stood so close to me. Sometimes, in our cell, when the wind blows from the female prison, we'll catch distant sounds of female

screams and shouts and even laughter. That is the closest we ever come to women. Only when the wind blows, at the right time, in the right direction” (39).

Here Janice is linked to other “angelic” women in the text, who act as messengers of hope: the photograph of Alice that makes its way through the prison bars; Hagar and the Mayfair girls, whose arrival at the demonstration are like “drops of soothing rain on the dry, brittle atmosphere” (171).³ Indeed, the linking of hope and dreams of liberation with natural imagery is a reoccurring motif throughout the novel. Lomba’s dreams, full of natural images of the stars, the sky, and the rain, form a salvific motif throughout the novel challenging the cycle of imprisonment. When he lives in the slums of Morgan Street trying to write a novel, he contrasts the realities of the outhouse the inhabitants are forced to use, with the sky: “squatting over the ass-scalding latrine pit, one could raise one’s eyes and contemplate the sometimes cloudy, sometimes starry sky” (115). When the police are chasing Lomba and his editor and they are stranded on the side of the road without petrol, it suddenly begins to rain. “The two look at each other with incredulity written on their faces; as if such a blessing is totally undeserved by them, totally unexpected” (210). A rain in the midst of the dry season is a good omen, an indication that the rainy season will eventually come again. These small symbols of hope reinforced by imagination are what keep Lomba’s dreams alive. When he defies his jailer he closes his eyes: “I willed my mind over the prison walls to other places. Free. I dreamt of standing under the stars, my hands raised, their tips touching the blinking, pulsating electricity of the stars. The rain would be falling. There’d be nothing else just me and rain and stars and my feet on the wet, downy grass earthing the electricity of freedom” (34-35). Those defiant dreams become a way of transcending his environment and like his love poems become imaginative tools for escaping the prison. Janice’s arrival and her

“flowery, musky” scent reinforce the actual potential for liberation in these dreams. If he imagined her and she arrived, then perhaps the angel of liberation that he imagines might also arrive. The final passage of this chapter again links the natural imagery with an angelic messenger of hope “Lomba was seated in a dingy cell in Gashuwa, his eyes closed, his mind soaring above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom; then the door clanked open, and when he opened his eyes Liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm” (43).

Lomba imagines his liberation in little pieces throughout the novel, and these again invoke the marabout’s emphasis on multiple levels of reality, “another surface, another air,” which can be found by plunging into the sea of stories (47). I began my extended discussion of Chapter One of the novel by saying that it would help us understand why Lomba’s vocation as a writer provided a particularly powerful model for showing how the imagination can achieve liberation. If, as I stated in Chapter Two, Lomba is a synecdoche for the imprisoned state, his actual imprisonment reflects on a small scale the imprisonment of the nation. His ability to imagine his own liberation through first intermeshing poems from another time and place into his own love poetry and second by using these love poems to call an angel that he has imagined for himself reflects the potential inherent within the national imagination. The love poetry Lomba writes is metaphoric for the revolutionary potential in connecting with other members of one’s community and together imagining how freedom might be achieved.

NOTES:

¹ Lomba's resistance plays a role initially of keeping him from going mad, similar to the experience recorded by George Mangakis, the Greek prisoner Soyinka quotes in his preface to *The Man Died*: "Self-defense. That is why I write. That is how I manage to keep my mind under control." (*The Man*, 12). He also performs a task first performed by Ogun, who plunged through the chthonic realm to bridge the distance between the gods and humanity. Soyinka notes in his essay "The Fourth Stage" that Ogun's ordeal is emblematic of human struggle against despair. This battle of will over mind, Soyinka claims, is at the essence of Yoruba tragic drama—a mythological drama that is re-enacted over and over again not only in a ritual context but also in the struggle of the writer against imprisonment. (*Art* 27-39)

² The first line of Edgar Allen Poe's "To Helen" reads "Helen, thy beauty is to me" (Ferguson, Salter, and Stallworthy 879); Lomba writes "Janice, your beauty is to me" (*Waiting* 31). The first line and a half of Donne's "The Good-Morrow" reads "I wonder by my troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved?..." (Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 263); Lomba writes "I wonder, my heart, what you and I / Did till we loved" (*Waiting* 31). The Sappho is reimagined from any one of many translations. The one I am using for comparative purposes here is J. Addington Symonds' 1833 translation from Henry Thornton Wharton's collection *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a literal translation* (69).

³ Chielozona Eze reads the figure of Liberty as the angel of the title and a "eulogized remembrance of Janice" (Eze 102). And, indeed, the appearance of both Alice and Janice in Lomba's prison can be read as appearances of angels in the text who perform the psychological function of Liberty at the end of the chapter, who says "Come, It is time to go" (*Waiting* 43). In his poem "Superman" that appears in the Autumn/Winter 2003 edition of *Pretext* that Helon Habila edited with Tiffany Murray, Habila contrasts the beliefs of a woman named Alice that he is Superman/Icarus with her own position: "But you were the angel, Alice / The winged one—the one that gave wings" ("Poems" 159). If we read this poem intertextually with the novel, then the appearance of the photograph of Alice could be what allows Lomba's mind to soar "above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom" (*Waiting* 43). That said, I will argue that the most significant angel of the title is most obviously the "angel of death" unleashed on the evening of the Abacha coup—as this is the title of the short story in *Prison Stories* where Lomba's friend is carried away by the angel of death on that same evening. The function of the angel of death as the *deus ex machina*, or the tool of the one writing the story, will be further explored in Chapter Six of my thesis.

**CHAPTER FOUR: Layering History: Intertextuality and Multivocality, the novel
form as liberation**

“Between the lines of Paul Radin’s Primitive Religion and my own Idanre are scribbled fragments of plays, poems, a novel and portions of the prison notes which make up this book. Six other volumes have been similarly defaced with my writing”
– Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*, 9

If Lomba’s use of the imagination provides a model for the rest of the nation, it also provides on a small scale examples of the same imaginative literary form and device that Habila uses throughout the rest of the novel. While Lomba used intertextuality as an SOS to indicate his presence to Janice, his intermingling of his own words with lines from memorized poems indicates that no text can hold together—it is constantly interspersed with multiple voices, multiple texts. And if Lomba provides a model for the kind of imaginative resistance available to the nation, he also provides a model for the kind of formal tools available to the writer. Like Lomba, Habila uses intertextuality to indicate the permeability of texts, but the specific form of the novel that he uses opens up even more possibilities than Lomba’s poetry. In an online *Encompass Culture* interview with Susan Tranter, Habila states, “The beauty of the novel is that it can absorb as many styles and philosophies as one cares to throw into it, and it gets the better for it.” If Habila imagines the nation under military rule like a story told for the nation by an evil puppeteer, a trope he reinforces with references to other texts, then his specific use of form opens up the boundaries between his fiction and other fictions and historical accounts that lie outside the novel. Acknowledging that the novel form does not allow monologic impulses to go unchallenged, his imaginative layering of his stories onto older stories places his novel into a much larger web of

associations that add further depth to his characters. As the marabout indicates, stories are not separate from each other but make up a whole ocean. The author fishes out specific stories to recreate history in the novel form.

Layering onto other stories

In the quote I have used as an epigraph for this chapter, Wole Soyinka notes that his own prison writing was quite literally written between the lines of his own published poetry as well as other texts. This actual interspersion of one text with another reinforces the ambiguity between one story and another, one text and another; it blurs the lines between the place one ends and the other begins. As I explored in the last chapter, Habila demonstrates this technique in the *Waiting for an Angel* when Lomba's "plagiarism" of poems indicates to the educated reader, Janice, that there is a deeper meaning to the poem than the surface patina of sentiment. If the figure of the writer, who joins multiple stories, illustrates the communal expression necessary for resistance, his use of the imaginative form illustrates the constructed nature of the prison (and the possibility for psychological resistance.) What Lomba does with the imaginative form on a smaller scale in his poems, Habila does on the larger scale of the novel. Habila engages history, palimpsests multiple realities, layering his story onto pre-existing/pre-written settings. Habila's characters perform in the same dramatic space of the nation-as-prison that writers like Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o experienced and formulated into a metaphor. In *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, Ngũgĩ, referencing his own imprisonment, notes that "[t]he prison yard is like a stage where everything, including movement, is directed and choreographed by the state" (*Penpoints* 56). He expands this notion to the idea that "[p]rison then is a metaphor for the

post-colonial space, for even in a country where there are no military regimes, the vast majority can be described as being condemned to conditions of perpetual physical, social, and psychic confinement” (60). The state of imprisonment represents the lack of control that the national community feels in their colonial and “post”-colonial states. Biodun Jeyifo notes of Soyinka’s self-presentation in his prison memoir *The Man Died*, that “[...] the author-protagonist’s own incarceration and attempted physical liquidation while in detention is linked with other great and small acts of abuse and corruption of power to metonymically depict a ‘season of anomy’ on a grand scale” (Jeyifo 181). Habila’s use of the imprisoned writer, Lomba, as a synecdoche for the nation, and the necessity of imaginative resistance owes much to the experiences and ideas expressed by these older writers. And while direct and indirect references to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Amílcar Cabral, Thomas Sankara, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembene and many other writers places his novel into a historical dialogue with a rich tradition of postcolonial resistance thinkers, Habila seems to rely the most on Soyinka for the recreation of the prison experience.

Biodun Jeyifo notes that Wole Soyinka “is probably the closest approximation there is to what could be describes as the ‘writers’ writer,’ the writer in whose corpus ‘writing’ stands out clearly in its own right, as a percept, a value which exercises tremendous, if heterodox fascination for other writers” (Jeyifo 277). This fascination with Soyinka’s theory of writing is obvious in Habila’s narrative. Direct and indirect tributes to Soyinka’s works are generously sprinkled throughout the novel: The student leader Sankara rouses the students with quotes from *The Man Died*: “Remember what Soyinka wrote, ‘The man dies in him who stands silent in the face of tyranny’ (*Waiting* 55). More indirect are Habila’s

appropriations of the rain motif that runs through *The Man Died* as a motif of hope in *Waiting for an Angel*, or his immersion in Soyinka's Ogunian theory of the art.

The overarching trope introduced by the marabout, the feeling that the characters are merely living in a story told for them, also owes much to the despair that Soyinka expresses in prison. In *The Man Died*, Soyinka describes how the dictatorial regime forged his confession against colleagues and renames the truth to suit their purposes. Soyinka imagines his tormenters taunting him “the truth, yes, truth—recognize the malleable word?—truth, the truth is that truth of ... [your colleagues] arrest following upon hints of your generous confession. That is the Truth. We have re-created truth and truth is now defined in our image” (*Man Died* 81). This hijacking of Soyinka's words “plunged [him] into the horrors of the imagination. I had begun to lose sane distinction between the supposition and the reality” (81). The poet is now living in the reality defined for him by his captors. I analyzed Habila's exploration of this inability to distinguish “between the supposition and reality” in the first chapter of this thesis when I described the multiple moments within the text where the characters feel like they are living in a story told for them: the marabout's fortune telling, the death of Bola's family imagined as a short film directed by a shadowy puppeteer. This feeling of a character being trapped in a text written for them is also found in Lomba's imagination of Alice trapped like the messenger in Franz Kafka's story “Great Wall of China:” “Alice would turn and see the women watching her mournfully. In her agitated state she'd imagine their number multiplied a thousand times, hemming her in, and the smell would settle around her, pulling her down with strong invisible hands” (*Waiting* 103). Her actions seem futile, since she is seemingly trapped in a story that has already been determined for her.

Habila borrows most notably from Soyinka in the first chapter of *Waiting for an Angel*, originally named “Love Poems” in *Prison Stories*, the story for which he won the Caine Prize. In Habila’s text, Soyinka’s experiences in prison described in his prison memoir *The Man Died* are used as a template for the experiences of Habila’s journalist Lomba. And although at a British Council event in 2003, Soyinka good naturedly accused Habila of “balkanizing” his memoir, Soyinka’s own prison writing “between the lines” of the few books he was allowed in prison speaks to the subversive possibilities of the interpenetration of texts.¹ Habila similarly intersperses the setting of Soyinka’s prison memoir with the experiences of his own character Lomba, figuratively writing between the lines of the memoir to create another story on top of the one that Soyinka and other writers tells, implying the repetitious nature of history, as well as providing possibilities for a new direction. The specific form of the novel gives Habila the freedom to weave these intertextual references into a new purpose.

Similar to the passage in *The Man Died*, where Soyinka requests books from the library, the character Lomba also requests books from the prison superintendent. “He wanted Wole Soyinka’s prison notes, *The Man Died*; but when it came it was *A Brief History of West Africa*” (*Waiting* 29). In openly referring to Soyinka as he also does in the words of his student demonstrators, Habila acknowledges the setting—as if he is on the same set that Soyinka reflected in his memoir, on which a different play is now being acted out. The actual events recorded and made into symbols by Soyinka are re-used by Habila. During his sojourn in prison, Soyinka devoured a dog-eared copy of the *Letters of Queen Victoria*, a seemingly ironic reference to the imperial past in which history is defined in the person of the queen and her perceptions of the colonies rather than by the experiences of the

“natives” of those colonies. Similarly, the substitution of *A Brief History of West Africa* for Soyinka’s prison memoirs requested by Lomba not only ironically refers to the scene in Soyinka’s prison notes in which he had requested books from the prison library but also reinforces the idea of living in a story written by someone else. The title *A Brief History of West Africa* evokes images of colonial texts in which the story told of West Africa is that of the Victorian-era European explorers like Richard Burton and colonial governors like Lord Lugard, as well as the critiques of novelists like Chinua Achebe on this telling of history.

At the end of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, as the District Commissioner thinks of including the story of Okonkwo in his book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, he considers writing a whole chapter on Okonkwo. Then he thinks better of it. “Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details” (*Things Fall* 209). Achebe is, of course, ironically commenting on the effrontery of the colonizer who will write only a paragraph on a man whose story has been the subject of Achebe’s entire novel. The history that the colonial officers in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* read in order to “understand” the people they are ruling is this same book, in which the author has been so disciplined in subverting individual stories to his own narrative of “pacification.” In “cutting out details,” the author reinforces the idea of an authoritative version of history. The details, the individual stories, have no place in the narrative of the colonizer. As Habila illustrates with the substitution of *A Brief History of West Africa* for the harrowing and detailed account of Soyinka’s imprisonment, neither have these individual stories any place in the narrative of the military dictatorships that followed official independence. Habila’s sly use of a character from *The Man Died* in the same passage where Lomba is denied the memoir speaks to the subversive

ability of fiction to undermine the “official” history recorded by the former or current regime.

The character of the prison superintendent is perhaps one of Habila’s most obvious appropriations from Soyinka’s prison memoir. It is as if the prison governor from *The Man Died* has been transferred to Lomba’s prison. Habila’s prison superintendent is an exploration of the character of the “clown” that Soyinka describes. In *The Man Died*, Soyinka himself writes of the prison governor as if he were a character in the radio comedy *Shaky-Shaky*, reinforcing the ambiguity between life and fiction. The prison governor in *The Man Died* raves at the Igbo detainees who have gone on hunger strike:

“You are. Sabotagists. And therefore we keep you here. As such. And treat you. So how dare you come here again and make. Conspiracy. You are trying to conspire. You hold meeting yesterday! I know. Against me that, you hold meeting, you will refuse your chop today, that is the meeting you hold. Do you know me? (striking himself on the chest) I maintain discipline. I can treat you like. Gentlemen but if you behave like hooligans then I will show you that I am a great. Hooligans than yourself.” (*Man Died* 103)

Although the prison superintendent abuses the prisoners and berates them for the only resistance they can manage, a refusal to feed themselves, the prisoners have discovered the weakness of the gaoler. Their refusal to eat undermines the authority of the man who prides himself in having a god-like control over their life and death. Their hunger fast, their insistence on wrenching control from him and determining their own stories, destabilizes the power dynamic of the prison. When Soyinka records his rant as a parody, as an episode from the radio comedy *Shaky-Shaky*, his association of the jailor’s rant with the “colourful murder of the language” of the “tycoon-boss” further undermines the psychological authority of the prison governor (103). Soyinka observes following the prison governor’s temper tantrum:

That morning I understood also why many prisoners survive—their gaolers give themselves away. Those torturers reassure the victims time and time again that they the victims have not attained their persecutors' low, that they therefore contain a spark of human essence worth preserving. It does not matter how it comes about, whether as a result of animality of the gaolers or by a sudden display of mindlessness, or by revealing such a ludicrous aspect of themselves, presenting the prisoner suddenly with a grotesquerie of the supposed *homo dignis*—the prisoner suddenly says to himself, this creature cannot destroy me. This creature is irrelevant. I am real. I represent reality. (99)

By layering onto the radio comedy, Soyinka acknowledges the ambiguity between where fiction begins and reality ends. Furthermore by showing/seeing the torturer in such a light, he frees himself from the illusion that the “truth is now defined” in the “image” of the gaoler. If he had earlier suffered from the inability to distinguish “between the supposition and reality” (81), the moment where he sees his “persecutors’ low” (99) helps him realize that the truth is not defined by the gaoler; instead the prisoner is the one who is real.

Habila builds on this episode from *The Man Died* in the idea of the prisoner wresting control of his own life away from the gaoler. He does this by appropriating the character and his jerky monologue to resurrect the prison superintendent in *Waiting for an Angel*. Soyinka’s prison governor (now in his third incarnation) appears in Habila’s novel to rage at Lomba, who refuses to tell him how he got the paper and pencil with which he has written his prison poems:

“So. You won’t. Talk. You think you are. Tough,” he shouted. “You are. Wrong. Twenty years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you. Don’t. Think you can deceive me. We have our sources of information. You can’t. This insect will be taken to solitary and he will be properly dealt with. Until. He is willing to. Talk.... Don’t think because you are political. Detainees you are untouchable. Wrong. You are all rats. Saboteurs. Anti government rats.” (*Waiting* 20)

Like the prisoners in Soyinka’s memoir who won’t eat, Lomba’s deliberate forgetfulness, his refusal to tell where he got the pen and paper gives him a rebellious agency even in a

situation where his actions seem determined. Furthermore, by appropriating the superintendent from Soyinka's memoir, Habila does not merely imitate his speech patterns, he builds on Soyinka's observations that glimpsing the gaoler in a moment of vulnerability can demystify the power inspired by the prison superintendent's position.

If we read the position of governor of a prison as a symbol for the head of state over a country imprisoned by the military, then Lomba's realization that "He was just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice" erodes the power the prison superintendent has over him psychologically (41). Like Soyinka, Lomba discovers that the story told by the oppressor is so brutal because in his obsession with power, he lacks the imagination to empathize with others. If in this prison space that takes on the symbolic role of the nation Muftau is a symbolic stand-in for the historical Abacha, then this passage makes it clear that the dictator is human. By recognizing the dictator as someone who can be mocked and even more devastatingly, someone to be pitied, Habila simultaneously breaks down the psychological power the superintendent has over Lomba and the power the dictator has over Nigeria.² Lomba's moment of partial sympathy with his oppressor and realization of his ultimate weakness is the moment the story told by the state loses its power to capture the soul.³

Habila uses Soyinka's prison governor to show Lomba's superiority, but he also develops the character further. In Soyinka's memoir, the writer is able to gain a certain amount of psychological freedom by presenting the prison governor as a parody. The prison governor appears only in his clownish moments of trying to persuade the prisoners that he is superior to them in rank and education and in the middle of the night, after Soyinka has been

hustled out of his cell, to present him with *Idanre*, Soyinka's newly published book of poetry. Because Soyinka is writing a memoir and not a novel, he focuses on his own experiences in prison. Other characters are described in the way he sees them, and the prison superintendent plays a very peripheral role. While Soyinka was limited to recording his own experiences in his memoir, the form of the novel gives Habila more freedom to explore the "peripheral" characters. Habila appropriates Soyinka's parody of the prison governor in Muftau's choppy pretentious voice, and continues it when Lomba subtly mocks the prison superintendent in the poems that he sends to Janice. However, he also expands the character beyond the parody to a fuller description of Muftau, the widower with a son who "had a name, and a history" (*Waiting* 37). When Lomba imagines the prison superintendent on a date with a woman he hopes to marry, he imagines in a more vulnerable setting the same voice full of clichés that Soyinka had used in the prison governor's rant. In Soyinka's memoir, the prison governor says, "Yes, I am going to talk seriously to you. That, you must listen and make sure. That, it does not go in at one ear and come out! At other ear" (*Man Died* 102). In *Waiting for an Angel*, the prison superintendent tells Janice, "I know you think I am not serious. That I only want to suck. The juice and throw away the peel. No" (*Waiting* 30). The parody remains, but by moving the jailor beyond the context of the prison and showing him in the intimacy of a dinner with the woman he wants to marry, Habila cracks open the hard veneer of the man of the man who serves as a metonym for the head of state, at the same time that he highlights his twisting of Lomba's poetry for his own purposes.

Through Janice, whom he has called into being through his imagination, Lomba hears more of the prison superintendent's story: a man grieving for his dead wife, a father of a young son. Lomba thinks "Muftau. The superintendent had a name, and a history, maybe

even a soul. I looked at his portrait hanging on the wall. He looked young in it, serious-faced and smart, like the cadet warders outside” (37). By learning the superintendent’s name and by imagining him in the context of his history, Lomba is able to see beyond the mythical position of power he had attempted to build up around himself, Lomba finds that he can pity him. The prison superintendent abuses his power by extorting Lomba’s poetry to woo his woman and by refusing to report his status as a political prisoner to Amnesty International, but the moment Lomba observes him plead with the angry woman whom he had hoped to marry, Lomba sees him not merely as his gaoler but also as a fellow man: “Surprisingly, I felt no anger towards him. He was just Man” (41). Building on Soyinka’s parody of the prison governor allows Habila to show the vulnerability, the “spark of humanity” in his gaoler (*Man Died* 99).

Habila’s appropriation of Soyinka’s character enables part of Lomba’s psychological release, just as his appropriation of Soyinka’s imagery of the “exhilarating storm” which “penetrated all defenses physical and mental, crushed the capsule to release the wild sweet scent of liberty... in contrast with that first death march into an artificial tomb” (*Man Died* 290) enables Lomba to soar “above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom” (*Waiting* 43). Likewise, his intertextual linkages to other works of literature give greater depth and purpose to his characters. When Auntie Rachael tells Kela “We are like crabs in a basket; we pull down whoever dares to stand up for what is right” (*Waiting* 186), she reflects, in a different context, the postcolonial disillusionment expressed by El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye in Ousmane Sembene’s satirical novel *Xala*. Confronted with his bad check writing habit, the Senegalese minister El Hadji accuses the other members of the Chamber of Commerce of hypocrisy: “We are nothing

better than crabs in a basket. We want the ex-occupier's place? We have it... The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place" (Sembene 84). Auntie Rachael's statement, therefore, not only refers to the specific instance of the visit of the secret service in *Waiting for an Angel* but draws on a larger body of literature pointing out the irresponsibility of neocolonial governments.

Similarly, when during the demonstration at the secretariat, Lomba's teacher Joshua protests the neglect of the government, saying, "We are dying from lack of hope" (174), he echoes a sentiment expressed by the Teacher in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, "How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders? There were men dying from the loss of hope, and others were finding gaudy ways to enjoy the power they did not have" (Armah 81). Not only does Habila layer on top of the existential despair Armah's characters express, but he also invokes their brief moments of hope: "[O]ut of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering" (85). The youth Lomba sees the morning he decides to "go out and get a life" are an invocation of the "beautiful ones." "Watching them, I felt curiously breathless; their beauty was astonishing." The vision of youth "crossing the bridge towards the rising sun" gives Lomba the impetus to leave his solitary room and begin to work as a journalist (*Waiting* 109). Like the stars and the rain, the youth represent the possibilities that lie on the other side of the "bridge" from despair to action, reflecting Armah's Teacher's statement that "The beauty was in the waking of the powerless" (Armah 85).

Similarly, the "possible" arrival of Liberty to Lomba's cell, in which Lomba "opened his eyes [and] Liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm" (43), echoes the Biblical passage in Acts 12:7-10 in which the angel wakes Peter and leads him

out of his prison cell. The characters of Joshua and Hagar also resonate with Biblical significance. The Biblical Hagar was elderly Sarai's young Egyptian slave who was given to the even more elderly Abraham to bear the son Ishmael. When Sarai felt threatened by Hagar, she threw the young woman and her son out into the desert to fend for themselves (Genesis 16). Like the Biblical Hagar, Habila's Hagar is sexually used/abused by an older father-figure (her step-father). Yet when she struggles to get away from him, her mother, misinterpreting the situation as a threat to her own marriage, throws Hagar out of the house (*Waiting* 150). While the biblical Hagar is visited by an angel during her time in the desert and becomes the mother of a nation, Habila's Hagar remains childless and afraid to accept Joshua's offers of love for fear of smearing his reputation. Joshua's character significantly echoes the Israelite leader who refuses to be intimidated by the giants in the land of Canaan, and who leads a scraggly group in the onslaught on Jericho, the city whose massive walls fell through the power of song and imagination and the help of a prostitute (Joshua 6). Habila's Joshua mounts a similar attack on the walls of the secretariat, but the walls remain standing and the people are scattered by a tear gas and gunfire.

Read in conjunction with the Biblical stories, Joshua's and Hagar's stories are given another symbolic level. If on the surface level of the text they are failures, the deeper associations that come with their names indicate a more optimistic reading. Although Hagar dies without issue, perhaps her defiance "gives birth" to a larger symbolic resistance that will later sweep over Poverty Street and the rest of the nation. Although she does not literally give birth to a nation, her appearance at the protest gives Joshua a "sudden decisiveness" (*Waiting* 172), the purpose that is needed to forge a new community and a new story out of the ashes of the old. And although Joshua's demonstration ends in disaster

and he disappears to “move on” (184), he leaves a similar determination and purpose behind him. His friendship with the young student Kela has transformed Kela from an angst ridden teenager into a passionate and imaginative young man. Perhaps the beautiful ones have already been born. Joshua’s insistence to Kela that “[a]ll we need is a little imagination to discover that things are not as fixed or as impossible as we believe” (186) indicates the possibilities that open up when the imagination is at work, when stories overlap and intersperse each other.

Even Lomba’s seemingly hopeless reference to Alice being like the messenger trapped in Franz Kafka’s story “The Great Wall of China” opens to a more hopeful interpretation. Initially this story seems to reinforce Alice’s helplessness. Lomba imagines her like the “messenger in Kafka’s *Great Wall of China*: the Emperor, on his deathbed in his innermost chamber, has summoned the messenger and whispers a very important message in his ear...” (103). Alice like the messenger knows the

absolute futility of [her mission] ... After the whispered message, Alice would turn and see the women watching her mournfully. In her agitated state she’d imagine their number multiplied a thousand times, hemming her in, and the smell would settle around her, pulling her down with strong, invisible hands. Above, her mother’s spirit would be flying around, beating its wings against the ceiling, drawing closer and closer to the window every day. (103)

Lomba’s imaginative placement of Alice and her mother into the futility of Kafka’s story recalls once again the marabout at the heart of the novel, and the seemingly futile acceptance of the story told for them. However, if Kafka’s story is read in its entirety it is clear that the narrator is questioning the reality of the “history” defined by the emperor and the mythic imperial city. In the story, the narrator undermines the reality of the Great Wall of China, noting that although the wall was meant to enclose all of China, it was built in sections:

Naturally, in this way many great gaps were left, which were only filled in gradually and bit by bit, some, indeed, not till after the official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, an assertion, however, which is probably merely one of the many legends to which the building of the wall gave rise, and which cannot be verified, at least by any single man with his own eyes and judgment, on account of the extent of the structure.
(Kafka 148-149)

Although the wall that “protects” China from the Northern invaders is supposedly impermeable, it is in fact full of breaches. Despite its imposing presence, its reality cannot be confirmed by any individual. Indeed, by the end of the story, the narrator has deconstructed the actual relevance of the emperor’s authority to the people in the narrator’s small southern town. The emperor seems only a part of a distant history or a dream that unifies the people of China yet loses its tangible ability to affect them. If the walls in *Waiting for an Angel* are representative of the power of the state, the insertion of Kafka’s story undermines those walls. Within the space of the text, the story seems only to reaffirm Alice’s hopelessness, but when read in its entirety, it reveals the constructed and permeable nature of her imprisonment.

Similar to Achebe’s challenge in which he expands the District Commissioner’s “reasonable paragraph” on Okonkwo to a whole novel (*Things Fall* 209), Habila fleshes out the details of the lives of ordinary people, those which would not normally be considered part of a larger history. As I have explained above, much of the power in the way he presents these ordinary lives is the way he references other literary works, indicating that not only are there multiple voices within his own novel but that his novel is only one of many novels voicing protest against oppressive structures. In his second novel, *Measuring Time*, Habila’s character Mamo envisions a “true history” of Nigeria, in which “if the historian could capture these ordinary lives, including their recollections of their own family’s past,

then he might come close to writing a true ‘biographical history’ of a nation; for when we refer to a nation, are we not referring to the people that inhabit that nation, and so isn’t the story of a nation then really the story of the people who make up that nation?” (*Measuring Time* 180). In Mamo’s subsequent attempt at this biographical history, he writes the history of his father the failed politician, and his aunt the divorcee, alongside the less than glorious history of the mai, the traditional ruler, of Keti. Every story has its own place alongside the others. Mamo says:

I want to make the Mai’s biography simply a part of the other biographies I told you about.... [that] I will eventually compile to form a biographical history of Keti. That’s what history really is, people and their lives, no matter how we try to manipulate it. It is the story of real people with real weaknesses and strengths and... not about some founding fathers and ... even if we want to write about the founding fathers we shouldn’t privilege them, we should place them on par with other ordinary folks... (225)

In his first novel *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila does much of what Mamo attempts to do in his biographical history, placing the story of the inglorious prison superintendent alongside the stories of the imprisoned writer, the brilliant student turned prostitute, and the young boy from Jos exiled from his family for smoking hemp. Just as Mamo discovers the inherent weakness of the “powerful” Mai when he writes his history, Habila reveals the way the superintendent may be overcome by showing him as “just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice” (*Waiting* 41).

NOTES:

¹ In a posting to the Jos ANA listserv on November 9, 2005 titled “[josana] W.S. on Habila: Specifics,” Al’kasim Abdulkadir quotes Soyinka, while at a British Council event in September 2003, as accusing Habila of “balkanizing” his memoir.

² As Soyinka notes in *Climate of Fear*, “Any fool, any moron, any psychopath can aspire to the seizure and exercise of power, and of course the more psychopathic, the more efficient... [A]ll have proved that power, as long as you are sufficiently ruthless, amoral, and manipulative, is within the grasp of even the mentally deficient” (57). Abacha may have made himself into a monster, but at the root of it, he is also a banal stupid man with a weakness for prostitutes. He has no imagination of “pity, mercy, humour, justice;” he has subjected any possibility of acquiring these morals to a relentless pursuit of satiating his own lusts for money, sex, and power.

³ In an introduction to his short story “The Night of the Monster” on the *Crossing Borders African Writing* website, Habila stated that oral stories heard during his childhood played a formative role in his own imagination. In a discussion of intertextuality, we might also look at how certain characters in his novel are layered onto older oral structures. The character of Muftau is reminiscent of Linda Hunter and Chaibou Elhadji Oumarou’s reading of the Hausa monster, the dodo, in *Aspects of the Aesthetics of Hausa Verbal Art*. “An encounter with Dodo can transform a ... weakling into a hero. He is greedy and ruthless, yet those very characteristics are sometimes his undoing, as he may well be duped by his victims” (85). While the Dodo often captures young girls and forces them to choose between death and marriage with him, the encounter often ends up with the girl coming out on top. Often the young woman will trick the dodo and escape with a child and great wealth. The prison superintendent is “greedy and ruthless,” as is the Dodo, but his extortion of poetry from Lomba ends up as a transformational moment in which Lomba uses to create poetry, which allow him to psychologically (and perhaps physically) escape the prison walls.

CHAPTER FIVE: Complicating the Symbolic and Re-orienting the role of the Writer

As we can see in the character of the prison superintendent, Habila, while building on pre-existing texts, resists simple political binaries. As Chielozona Eze notes “[t]his idea of freedom, of the struggle to transcend boundaries, is the novel’s thematic cornerstone” (103). A reviewer of *Waiting for an Angel* on Amazon.com, the forum of the “ordinary” reader, N. Nwokeabia, precedes her positive review of the novel with her initial reaction to descriptions of the plot, “I was quite skeptical about reading a novel about Nigeria that had been described mostly in terms of politics and prison life. That topic, I thought, had been covered ad nauseam in contemporary Nigerian literature. When would Nigerian authors begin to write about human beings living their lives as normal people?” The frustration Nwokeabia expresses with the use of “politics” in Nigerian literature is one that has its precedent in a wider literary discourse. Sensational stories of prison, police brutality, military regimes: these are the stories that make the international pages of Western newspapers—not the story of “human beings living their lives as normal people.” Of course, the existence of people living “ordinary” lives does not mean that there are not also people living in prison—and the use of the prison as a metaphor for the life of the people of Nigeria under a military regime does capture much of the communal dejection of what Okonkwo calls Nigeria’s “post-war nadir.”

If Nwokeabia finds that descriptions of politics in African novels often “meddle in stereotypes,” it is perhaps because political texts in the past, react against the “white” of colonialism with the “black” of negritude, leaving little room for grey. As Tejumola Olaniyan notes in *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, this “binarist” discourse is often a

stage in “the space of an emerging discourse that tries at once to be both anticolonialist and post-Afrocentric” (Olaniyan 26). The rebellion against colonialism, the reclaiming of culture and the “writing back” at Eurocentric discourses that characterizes the novels of Achebe, Ngugi, and other first generation African novelists played an essential role in the national struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, however, the revolutionary language had the tendency to become what the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele calls “socially entrenched manner of thinking about reality; a manner of thinking which, over the years, has gathered its own momentum and now reproduces itself uncritically... an epistemology in which reality is conceived purely in terms of a total polarity of absolutes” (Ndebele 60). While like Olaniyan, Ndebele understand the reasons for these political polarities, he suggests that the “necessary commitment to engaging the forces of oppression through paying critical attention to the concrete social and political details of that oppression” became replaced with a facile rhetoric that “began to dominate the consciousness of the oppressed in such a way that they could easily lose the sense of the actual mechanisms of their own oppression” (63). That is, the political symbolism began to lose its efficacy because it was not tied closely enough to the actual voices and needs of the people. Ndebele, therefore, proposes the necessity of grappling with irony and relevance. This does not mean that the writer is any less politically committed. Relevance is not limited to merely the structures of the state but the life of the community:

First of all, there must be a freeing of the imagination in which what constitutes the field of relevance is extended considerably. What is relevant is the entire community of the oppressed. For example, politics is not confined only to the seizure of state power; it can also be the decision by members of a township women’s burial society to replace a corrupt leader with a new one. (71)

Lomba's editor James says, "You can't escape it. In this country the very air we breathe is politics" (*Waiting* 112). This implies that although Lomba claims he is "not very political," this is because he is thinking of politics in a very narrow frame. If as Ndebele suggests, we think of politics as encompassing all levels of society, then an engagement with politics in literature can be just as relevant to what Nwokeabia calls "human beings living their lives as normal people" as it is to grand critiques of master narratives. Habila's engagement with the multiple stories of characters as varied as a general's daughter, the nephew of a woman who runs the local eatery, and an urban teacher in love with a prostitute illustrates the incisive political nature of a text that refuses to engage in predictable political binaries. Habila's text, then, illustrates the complexity of a new stage in what Olaniyan calls the "emerging discourse" that has moved beyond the "writing back" stage of earlier writers.

The monolithic truths that the military state tries to impose on people are deconstructed by the very multiplicity of voices within the state. The oppressor itself is not a monolith, as much as it tries to pretend that it is; it cracks and fractures. By exploring the individual stories of the oppressor class in his novel, as we see in his development of Muftau's character or in the character of the general's daughter, Alice, Habila pries open these cracks and further destabilizes the structure of the oppressor. In these explorations of complexity, we find the kind of "defamiliarization" from pre-existing political binaries that Ndebele speaks of. Similar to Ndebele, Ato Quayson argues that if postcolonial African literature is necessarily political, then in order for it to be relevantly political—to transcend the "unsatisfactory" present, such a literature

has vigorously to avoid the dominant forms with which political discourse itself attempts to constitute such a reality ... [which have] operated mainly in a quasi-metaphysical language of Good v. Evil, of Chaos v. Order, and that in the hands of

politicians this has served as a necessary simplification that obscures the real complexities of what takes place in the political domain.” (Quayson 94)

Quayson’s suggestion that literature must change “the existing shape of dominant political discursive paradigms” to enact a “*liberatory politics*” is significant in my analysis of *Waiting for an Angel*.

By building on writers like Soyinka, whose works complicate binaries while making incisive political statements, Habila follows a tradition of linking individual characters to larger metaphoric political statements. Yet while his novel can be read on the anagogic level of the universal struggle against oppression, the individual stories of the characters create a tension with such a symbolic reading.¹ The rape of the female students by the soldiers when the university campus is invaded can be read symbolically for the rape of the nation by the military regime, a symbol also utilized by Okey Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain*, yet on the more literal level, Habila explores the actual complexity of these “symbolic” women’s lives. Every time the reader is tempted to universalize the lofty symbolism of the text, the multiple perspectives of the characters in the book complicate simplification to mere symbol. Rape is not just a symbol, just as imprisonment is not just a symbol; both are deeply wounding forces of violence with a very real history in Nigeria.

Just as the passages exploring the psyche of the prison superintendent crack open the façade of a unified oppressor, the story of Lomba’s lover Alice deconstructs assumptions that the elite class is a monolithic set with no internal power differentials. On the one hand, Alice is a general’s daughter who lives in a posh apartment and “busts” lectures to rendezvous with a mulatto with an “affected foreign accent” (*Waiting* 88, 91). In an ideological reading, she and her first boyfriend are a clear symbol of the neocolonial elite

against whom the masses must struggle. Yet, Habila's characterization resists such simplistic interpretations. As explored earlier, Alice can be seen as one of the angels of the texts, the memory of whom inspires Lomba's subversive love poetry. Both Alice and her mother, who had previously benefited from the military regime, are read sympathetically by Habila. Both, like Lomba, are imprisoned: Alice's mother lies dying of cancer in a hospital, while her husband enjoys himself with a new young wife. Alice is trapped into a relationship with a wealthy military man to pay for treatment she knows is futile. The escape that Alice's mother is flying toward is that of death, which the marabout calls a new beginning—the exit out of one story and entry into another. Alice does not escape so easily. Instead of marrying Lomba, the writer, whom she truly loves, she finally enters the ultimate prison of marriage with Ngai, paralleling Lomba's entry into a literal prison. No easy answers are provided for Alice; she never makes any movement to escape from her prison, except to plant a “feverish kiss” on Lomba's lips the last time she sees him (107). Although a desperate and ultimately futile move, this one action does allow Lomba to remember her as an angel and provoke the love poems he writes in prison which eventually bring him hope. Indeed the chapter “Alice” can be read as central to the formation of the text, as I will explore in the next chapter.²

Similar to the complication of the category of the “elite,” the people on Poverty Street may be “the wretched of the earth,” but they do not merely embody the nameless “lumpen-proletariat” that Ojikutu/Mao would like to see start a revolution. Like the jailor they have names and histories and dreams: Brother with his tall tales, and Nancy with her proclivity for quotable quotes, the teacher Joshua with his sad love affair, and the prostitute Hagar who gives Kela a Charles Dickens novel along with a condom. Through the many stories of the novel such as those I explored in chapters one and four, Habila explores the

complexity of hope in the face of despair. The stories of Poverty street and the abused women who live there retain their significance as metaphors for a nation abused by the military, and a disillusioned populace who accustom themselves to the “selling of” their bodies. But these men and women are also fully developed, intelligent characters, whose actions have profound consequences for the dreams of the people.

Complicating the Heroic Role of the Writer

Habila’s complicating of political simplification applies even to what might be the impression of a first reading: of the writer as a Promethean hero. Although writing and storytelling is given a powerful place at the center of the novel, the pen has its limits. After the *Dial* magazine office is burned by thugs (yet another attempt by the regime to make sure that the hegemonic narrative is the only one heard), Lomba mourns that “these very ashes could be from my pages” (*Waiting* 204), a lament that echoes his despair at the university when he burns the pages defiled by soldier’s boots. And as James mutters, “The bodies keep piling up” (213). Not only have Lomba’s words been destroyed but Dele Giwa and Kudirat Abiola, both of whom spoke boldly against military regimes, are assassinated, while Lomba and James are being pursued by the security agents. When a prostitute accosts the traumatized Lomba, he tells her, “I am impotent.... I don’t have a gun” (213). His words are significant on several different levels. If the military has symbolically raped the country with their guns, then it has also emasculated/stripped power away from those who do not have guns to fight back. Since Lomba is a writer, he could claim as Ngugi does in the *Barrel of a Pen* that while “not always ... mightier than the sword” the pen when “used in the service of truth..., can be a mighty force” (69). However, in admitting his impotence in the face of the

death angel that has been loosed on Nigeria, Lomba is also admitting that his pen is no literal match for the guns of the soldiers.

His pessimism is reinforced, when his editor James and he seek refuge at the house of a friend who is hosting a surreal party full of poets. One of the poets reads a poem that ends with the stanza:

Now is time
To stifle for ever
The crafty demons of this earth that
Daily clip our wings. Now our sun
Is rising, our gloom lifting. Now is
The time to cast off the iron that binds us. (*Waiting* 217)

This poem reflects the imagery of sunrise that “shines into” the faces of the beautiful youth who inspire Lomba to leave his solitary room as well as the imagery of flight out of prison that becomes significant when Lomba himself is imprisoned. Yet, these poets are doing nothing active to “cast off the irons.” When Lomba calls the poem “gratuitous” because “[o]ur gloom is not lifting. Our sun is setting” (217), a woman painter tells him “Everybody knows him. He has given readings all over the world, and he has been arrested twice... You really must try and get arrested—that’s the quickest way to make it as a poet. You’ll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award” (218). These artists are not heroes, although their poetry might style them as such; they are more concerned with their own literary self-advancement than political engagement. When Lomba tells the group that the *Dial* office has been burnt to ashes, the writers seem more concerned with what this means for their own poetry than what it means for the magazine, responding, “‘I’ll write that into my new poem.’ ‘I’ll use it as the prologue to my new book. It is just the symbolism I’ve been searching for’” (215). Rather than symbolism being used

as a way to highlight the atrocities of the regime as Lomba does when he uses accepted literary tropes to indicate his literal imprisonment, the atrocities of the regime are made into symbols. The symbolism becomes a means in itself. The poets calls for action are useless because they are not doing anything practical—they are writing to benefit themselves, and to, as the artist Mahalia, tells Lomba, “get out of this fucking country” (221). The prison, to them, is a metaphor, a symbol of heroism—they pay little attention to the voices of those behind actual bars. In his essay “The Writer in a Modern African State,” Soyinka writes that there comes a point where the writer must either fully engage with the despair of his society or “boldly ignore” it; “only let there be no pretense to a concern which fulfills itself in the undeclared, unproven privations of the European world” (*Art* 20).

This scene acts as a kind of disclaimer for Habila’s overall project, in which he shows the dangers of the political extremes discussed by Ndebele and Quayson. For the political rhetoric of the character Ojikutu, nicknamed Mao, the more balanced Joshua and Auntie Rachael display a certain amount of suspicion. When Mao recites “According to Frantz Fanon, violence can only be overcome by greater violence” Joshua asks “Can you?” (*Waiting* 161). Later he tells Kela that Ojikutu/Mao is a “romantic fool. He has read too many books about revolutions in China and Russia. Now he thinks he can start one here with petrol bombs and maybe a couple of guns and knives. He’ll get us all killed. He doesn’t know what desperate people he is up against” (162). Ojikutu has been so seduced by the language of revolution that he does not think about what Ndebele would call political relevance. Related to Mao’s romanticism, the writers and artists at the party bask in the poetic language of revolt but are unwilling to commit to any kind of true action. The ideological rhetoric of both Mao and the poets seems relevant to Foucault’s critique of the

often oversimplified claims of an ideal socialism against the abuses of Soviet governments, “we must open our eyes ... to what enables people there, on the spot, to resist the Gulag, what makes it intolerable for them, and what can give the people of the anti-Gulag the courage to stand up and die in order to be able to utter a word or a poem” (Foucault 136).

What Foucault seems to suggest here, and what Habila implies in his resistance to oversimplifying discourses throughout the novel is that ideology and writing not closely tied to the voices of the people it claims to represent is self-congratulatory hot air. Habila consistently subverts any monolithic claim to authority, whether it is a claim by the regime or a claim by the revolutionary Mao for a counter regime. Habila’s most charismatic characters are those who have moved beyond those binaries to an acknowledgement of the irony that Ndebele calls for. However, this subversion of authority paradoxically circles back round to the realization that the writer does have a great deal of power. This power comes from encounters with others, whether community encounters like Lomba’s conversations with Joshua or Kela, or encounters with other texts like Habila’s written dialogue with Soyinka, Ngugi, Sankara and others. It is the writer with a social imagination, who can reflect the many contradictory and incongruous voices of the community, whose pen becomes the “mightiest force” (*Waiting* 69).

According to Chielozona Eze, Lomba’s “inbetweenness” is actually a powerful position, which resists a “reductionist conception of reality as a given essence” (Eze 102). Ultimately, Eze concludes, the focus on crossing boundaries brings together the disparate Lagos community into a “cosmopolitan solidarity” possible “only after each has transcended his or her own bigoted interest, often articulated in the discourse of cultural purity and distinctiveness” (103). Eze’s reflection on the vision of Nigeria expressed in third wave

Nigerian fiction “as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space,” therefore, provides an example of the kind of challenge to political simplifications that Quayson calls for in his liberatory politics.

It is Lomba’s encounter with the boy Kela that gives him the impetus to go ahead and cover the political protest organized by Kela’s mentor Joshua. His disillusionment can only be turned to something more positive when he goes back to “paradigmatic locale” of Morgan Street to talk to the people still living there. When Lomba laments to Kela that “Here in this country, our dreams are never realized; something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare,” Kela counters with what Joshua had told him: “Joshua said that dreams are a part of reality, and that we often can’t know what is realizable till we begin to dream” (*Waiting* 167). The writer, therefore, becomes a tool in recording the disparate dreams of the people and in synthesizing them into a greater unified dream. Throughout the novel, Habila records multiple dreams and fantasies: Brother’s dream of a party bidding Poverty goodbye, Nancy’s dream of finding “Her Man,” Joshua’s dream of Hagar and America, Peju’s dream of being a television broadcaster, Lomba’s dream of publishing a novel. All of these are ordinary dreams of ordinary people, hopes for the future and for happiness, but almost all of these dreams are complicated by the prison in which they live. Brother’s poverty is linked to his environment; Peju is killed in a crash with a military vehicle; Lomba cannot find a publisher in a country where “it’d be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read” (194). As Habila notes in his afterward, “[e]very day [under Abacha] came with new limitations, new prisons” (224).

Yet in harnessing together the many dreams, as well as the frustrations, of the people, Lomba, as writer, is able to harness the power of the imagination. It is the imagination that allowed Lomba to subvert the intentions of the prison superintendent and transcend the prison walls. Although we have seen the dangers of writers taking symbolism from life and using it for the sake of the poem itself, the tools of metaphor can be powerful if applied with specific intent. If the oppressor metaphorically writes a story through the “barrel of a gun” that hems in the people of the nation, if the oppressor uses the “angel of death” as a tool to keep the people in check, then the counter-writer is able to twist that story and reinterpret it. The writer might acknowledge the presence of the angel of death but then use it for her own purposes. Rather than allowing the angel of death to enforce the dictator’s story, the writer/storyteller uses death, as the marabout claims, as an opportunity for a new beginning, a moment to imagine alternate realities. These alternate stories invade reality so that it becomes ambiguous about what is “real” and what is “imagined.”

Within Lomba’s text, the permeability of “fiction” with life can be seen in the prophetic moments when the characters predict the future. The prophetic gift also lands on the unlikely figure of the prison superintendent, Muftau. Although the prison superintendent has suppressed his imagination in the pursuit of power, his encounter with Lomba and a newly awakened sympathy allows him to imagine the unthinkable. When he awkwardly tries to comfort Lomba, he conjectures that “Maybe the leader will collapse and die. He is mortal, after all. Maybe a civilian government will come. Then. There will be amnesty for all political prisoners” (26). Ironically, Muftau’s “prophecy” points outside the text of Habila’s novel itself to the event of Abacha’s Viagra-induced collapse in actual Nigerian history, an event only briefly hinted at within the first chapter of the novel, which ends ambiguously on

a moment of possibility, “It is probable that in 1998, when the military dictator Abacha died, and his successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, dared to open the gates to democracy, and to liberty for the political detainees” (43). I will further explore the significance of the prophecy pointed outside of the text of the novel in Chapter Six of my thesis. For my purposes in this chapter, I will merely note that, as illustrated also in the prison story in which Lomba seems to write Janice into being, it indicates the slippery boundaries between the imagination and real life, a reality illustrated most powerfully in the scene where Lomba writes a story about his life on Morgan Street that, like Habila’s characterization of Nigeria on a smaller scale, is a “paradigmatic locale” (117).

Like the stories of entrapment I explored in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Lomba’s characters do in fact reflect what his editor James tells him to capture: the “general disillusionment, the lethargy” of being trapped into a story where “One general goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness. They’ve lost all faith in the government’s unending transition programmes. Write on that” (113). As I explored in Chapter One, the story that Lomba writes is filled with “ubiquitous gun and whip-toting soldiers,” “potbellied, glaucomatous kids” playing in gutters alongside the carcasses of “mongrel dogs worried by vultures” (118). This story does, indeed, seem to reflect the despair of life in a prison until the end of the story where he writes of “the kerosene-starved house-wives of Morgan Street. I make them rampage the streets, tearing down wooden signboards and billboards and hauling them away to their kitchens to use as firewood” (118). This moment suggests both the extremity of the environment, which has forced the people of Morgan street against the wall, as well as the agency of the women who take their futures

into their own hands. And although James removes the celebratory conclusion before publication, telling Lomba he is “laying it on a bit too thick,” on his way home, Lomba sees an angry mob of women who “set to hacking and sawing” at a large billboard advertising condoms. It is Lomba’s knowledge of the script that allows him to tell the man next to him that “‘They are not crazy. They are just gathering firewood’ I explained to him. It was my writing acting itself out. And James thought I had had laid it on too thick. I wish he were here to see reality mocking his words.” Although Lomba’s first reaction is one of hopelessness that “we are only characters in a story and our horizon is so narrow and so dark[,]” this episode is a revolutionary moment in the text (119). While Lomba, as well as the women outside the window of the *Molue*, may be characters in a story, this moment marks a remarkable departure from the prophecies of prison and death foretold by the marabout. The porous borders between Lomba’s fiction and his reality that allow his writing to act itself out indicate the possibilities of the imagination—the possibility that while caught in a the literary metaphor of a prison, the “prisoners” might turn around and revolt. Lomba, and subsequently the mob of women, take the text into their own hands and appropriate the property of the state to sustain their own needs. Just as Lomba’s prison “plagiarism” provides a small-scale model of how Habila uses intertextuality throughout the novel, this moment provides a small-scale example of how Habila reaches into the interior level of his fiction and explodes it out into the larger arena of history. In Chapter Six, I will further explicate this episode to indicate the significant role the writer plays in activating a social imagination that can escape fiction into reality.

In my introduction, I mentioned Christopher Okonkwo’s suggestion that Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, and Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* be read

alongside each other to “chart a liberation imperative and trajectory.” That is by retelling the history of Nigeria, the three novels are able to reinterpret and symbolically re-imagine in their texts the movement from “nihilism to hope, absence to presence, and from apathy to action” (par. 8).

While my concern in this thesis is only with Habila’s novel, Okonkwo’s formulation of the dialogue between the three novels and their significance together as texts that re-chart new possibilities for Nigeria is quite useful to my argument. The existence of the three novels and their reinterpretation of Nigerian history are testimony to the voices that escaped the monologic repressions of the historical Nigeria. Habila does not merely reproduce the fictional Nigeria in his novel, but in fact uses the historical events of the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria as a text, which he interpenetrates with the stories of his fictional characters. This appropriation of actual historical events and using them as if they were fiction, such as placing the murders of Dele Giwa and Kudirat Abiola on the same intense day, indicates the permeable boundaries between (con)texts and the multiple perspectives of stories that make their places in the fissures between texts: between Lomba’s story and the story of Nigeria as lived by the author Helon Habila, between the first collection *Prison Stories* and the novel *Waiting for an Angel*, between other seminal literary texts and the stories told by Habila’s many characters.

NOTES:

¹ This resistance against simplistic symbolic readings is also reflected in Habila's comments in a *BBC News* essay "Sense of the City: Lagos." He notes that although earlier Nigerian writers saw "Lagos as a very convenient symbol of whatever is alien to Africa, whatever is intrusive, foreign to African values....," he tries to "show more acceptance of the fact of the city in African life.... I just show people going about their lives in Lagos. You can actually live there. You can be good or bad there. Not like it was presented before where if you came to Lagos you would be automatically doomed.... I think a lot of young writers are going to be more sympathetic in their representation of Lagos because they understand it more."

² While the chapter "Alice" works well structurally at the centre of the novel, tying together middle, end, and beginning as I will discuss in the next chapter, I also found the chapter, which was not in the original collection *Prison Stories*, somewhat problematic. Although an entire chapter is named after her, I find Alice a flat character, not nearly as engaging as the other important women in the novel: Hagar, Auntie Rachael, Nancy, and Janice.

**CHAPTER SIX: Breaking into History: destabilizing the boundaries between fiction
and reality through the social imagination**

“Stories are spirits, we’d say in Africa, no one knows where they come from, or where they’ll end up, but in that brief moment that they are with us they animate and inspire us, and show us how possible the impossible really is.”

--Helon Habila, *Pretext* (Autumn/Winter 2003) viii

In Chapter Four, I looked at the way Habila layers on top of and writes in the interstices of other texts, recording multiple voices and multiple perspectives, deconstructing the notion of a monolithic unitary story. Within his fictional world, layers of reality interact so that the characters are able to use their imagination to subvert and deconstruct the story that has been told for them by the military regime. At the end of Chapter Five, I speculate that by using history as yet another text in his novel, Habila indicates that fiction can play a powerful role in re-imagining possible future histories. By playing with time and using literary terminology to discuss actual history, he breaks down the boundaries between reality and fiction. Ultimately, Habila not only uses historical events in a fictional way but quite literally breaks reality into the fiction of the text.

In his essay “Another Age,” Habila records a party that he attended in Lagos in November 1999 after the demise of Abacha and the reinstatement of democratic rule. “Later, in my novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, I tried to recreate that occasion using the same mix of ingredients: poets, alcohol, camaraderie, euphoria—but in the book the euphoria is not of celebration and hope, but of panic and despair. I put the time back to 1997, the last days of General Abacha’s reign of terror” (“Another Age” 150). Not only does Habila use a setting from an incident in his own life, but he makes a bizarre cameo appearance, as himself, in the

scene in which Lomba rushes to the balcony to throw up. Suddenly someone else “rushes out and leans over the rail and throws up. ‘Hi,’ he says to Lomba, wiping his mouth with his hand, ‘I am Helon Habila.’ Another one follows almost immediately; he vomits and introduces himself, ‘Hi, I am Toni Kan’” (*Waiting* 218). A parade of contemporary Nigerian writers, actual friends of the author Helon Habila, many of whom were at that party, follow. This intrusion into the text by the author (and his writer friends) opens up questions about the boundaries between Habila’s fiction and Habila’s reality. On one level, the appearance of the author into his own text works as a kind of *deus ex machina*, a reminder that he is the one telling the story. Yet, unlike the *deus ex machina* in Greek plays, Habila does not seem to solve any problems in his brief appearance. Indeed, his actions and the actions of the other writers merely mirror the actions of Lomba who has just vomited over the railings. If Lomba’s vomiting illustrates the build up of despair that threatens to overwhelm him, then Habila and the other actual writers’ vomiting contributes to the hopelessness of the scene. If the author cannot fix it, then who can? Instead of ironing out a messy plot with a swift intervention, Habila’s appearance only serves to further disorient Lomba. The intruders from another reality fade back into the scene, in which “[t]here should be wailing instead of laughter, tears instead of beer, Lomba thinks desperately; this is a crazy, reversed wake where no one is allowed to cry, and which has imperceptibly degenerated into a bacchanalia” (219). The euphoric party Habila describes from his own experience has been apparently placed into an inappropriate context. Dele Giwa and Kudirat Abiola have just been assassinated, this is the wrong time and place for a celebration. The insertion of this scene from the future destabilizes an already unstable situation. The author merely seems to be playing with his characters. Habila’s increasing despair echoes that of Auntie Rachael

who names her restaurant “Godwill... He will do whatever He feels like doing, which is mostly destruction of dreams and hopes” (147). If the author makes an appearance into his own novel, he seems to be doing “whatever He feels like doing,” not making any kind of merciful intervention.

However, if we take a step back and look at Habila’s intrusion into the text from the perspective of the entire novel, his appearance provides a clue to how we can interpret the rest of the story. I suggest that, as with other forms of intertextuality, Habila’s breaking into his own text does violence to the structure of the boundaries between fiction and reality—a trauma that ripples outward into the rest of the novel—and is reflected in the multiple echoes from one story to another. This is not merely a layering on top of older histories and stories as I earlier explored in my explication of Habila’s intertextuality, but a break-in from the future. On one level, Habila’s intrusion cracks open the smooth façade of the story controlled by the military. If the characters are living in a story that is being written for them, then the brief opening into another future world where Abacha has died and there is an elected government in place belies Lomba’s pessimistic conviction that “our horizon is so narrow and so dark” (119), that “our sun is setting” (217). If the life in the novel feels like a story that has been created by the military rulers, then Habila’s insertion of a party that actually took place after the demise of the 15 years of military rule subtly undermines the illusion that the military “authors” have firm control over the nation. Letting the light of a real future shine into a fictional past also wreaks havoc on a neat progression of linear time. Such a progression is disrupted and manipulated in the fractured structure of the novel.

The Arrangement of the Novel

If reconstructed into a linear line like a history text, Lomba's story would read as follows: A brilliant young student arrives in Lagos full of hopes; however, his dreams are quickly shattered when the university is continuously closed by the government, his writings destroyed by soldiers, and his roommate's family dies in a car crash. Although he drops out of university to write a novel, he never finishes it; the two women he loves abandon him; and finally after he finds employment as a journalist, he is arrested and thrown into prison, after which he is never heard of again. This is the story of a failure, dreams turned to nightmares, hopes crushed by the powerful grinding wheel of a regime-determined fate. This is the story that a prison superintendent might read in the Lomba's prison file. What a dictator may, in Soyinka's words, "redefine" as truth—the despairing story of an artist's impotence in the face of a deterministic military defined future.

However, this is not the story that Habila tells. By breaking up and rearranging the linear story, he wrests control over the narrative away from an environment-determined fate and places it into the hands of the artists and the multiple characters who tell their stories. In form, Habila's novel re-enacts the mythic rebellion of the slave Atunda in Yoruba mythology. According to Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the Yoruba pantheon was created by Atunda, the slave of the first deity Orisa-nla. Frustrated by his imprisonment, Atunda rolled a boulder onto the god and "sent him hurtling into the abyss in a thousand and one fragments." Significantly, the universe is created by the fragmentation of an absolute whole, by a spirit rebelling against enslavement to a monolithic power. The pantheon of gods arises from the shards of the one god, and the world is "peopled by the mortal shards from the common ancestor" (*Myth* 27, 28). This myth can be read doubly as

not only a call to resistance against an enslaving power but also as evidence of what can happen when an authoritative text is shattered into thousands of different perspectives.

As Scheub notes, most stories have plots that move "...in a linear fashion, but nonlinear, regularly repeated sequences subvert that linear surface..." (*Story* 96). In *Waiting for an Angel* the non-linear movement is pre-eminent. Habila's novel is made up of fragments of a larger story, as if it has been shattered. There is no linear plot except for what the reader reconstructs. The story begins with Lomba in prison, and the rest of the stories in the novel are told from multiple voices, multiple perspectives, stories that like a broken mirror no longer reflect one authoritative vision of the world, but lie shattered, jagged fragments shining light in every direction. While the fragmentation might be interpreted as reflecting the brokenness of Nigeria, it can also be interpreted as the power of the artist and writer to break out of the prison of story in Nigeria. Just as the one god Orisa-nla was shattered into the many deities by a rebellious slave, Habila, by fracturing his novel, challenges the one monolithic story told by the elite rulers of Nigeria. The stories are told from different perspectives and overlap in chronological sequence, so that time speeds forward and then doubles back. The resistant nature of the fractured narrative is both overt like the resistance enacted by Joshua and subversive like Lomba's prison writing.¹

In *Waiting for an Angel*, although the reader automatically begins to reconstruct the novel into a sequence that makes sense in "real life," the progression of chapters as designed by Habila are not random. After shattering the story, Habila rearranges it in such a way that focuses on what Soyinka notes as the "...creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him, the most energetic, deeply combative inventions..." (*Art* 31). While the first chapter starts with Lomba in prison, setting the tone

for the constant repetition of prison imagery, which implies that Nigeria itself is a prison, the last chapter ends with a focus on Lomba's writing, as he heads towards the demonstration to cover the defiant actions of the community. This kind of paradoxical rebellion in the face of despair echoes Soyinka's image of Ogun plunging into the chaotic void in order to bridge the gap between the gods and humanity (*Art* 30-31). As Lomba heads toward the demonstration at the Secretariat, "[s]uddenly a vision of handcuffs and stone walls flashes in his mind, like a presentment" (*Waiting* 222). The readers have known from the beginning that Lomba's fate is prison, a future reinforced by the prophecy of the marabout and by Lomba's multiple presentments. He defiantly covers the demonstration only to be caught in a seemingly deterministic cycle that lands him at the beginning of the text again, in prison. However, in structuring the novel so that it ends on a note of defiance, no matter how reluctant, Habila privileges resistance rather than despair. Furthermore, the fact that Lomba is going to the demonstration determined to "cover" the demonstration, despite the fact that the magazine office has been burned only that morning, reinforces the powerful force of individual stories that although suppressed and imprisoned eventually break free.

The novel begins and ends with Lomba's story: the first story privileges the power of imagination, the final story privileges the necessity of direct political action. In both stories the power of writing is showcased. Between these two most obvious examples of writing-as-resistance are five case studies that show the importance of communal interaction. The seven chapters are like a symbolic week of creation, framed by the "Acknowledgements" and "Afterward." Within these seven chapters the narratorial voices are carefully arranged into a parallel structure: the first, middle and last stories being told mostly in the third person

and the chapters that come between being told in the first person. This can be seen in the table below.

Chapter	1. Lomba	2. The Angel	3. Bola	4. ALICE	5. Lomba	6. Kela	7. James
Narrative Voice	3 rd /1 st (Lomba)	1 st (unnamed friend)	1 st (Lomba)	3 rd /1 st (Lomba)	1 st (Lomba)	1 st (Kela)	3 rd
Summary of Chapter	The imprisoned journalist Lomba writes poetry that enables an imaginative “escape” from prison.	The university students find a marabout on the beach, who tells Lomba he will go to prison and Lomba’s friend he will see the Angel of Death the day he is to die. The day of the military coup, the man resists the soldiers and is killed.	In the midst of the student protests at the university, the family of Lomba’s roommate Bola are killed in a car accident with a military vehicle. Bola goes mad and is arrested.	The student Lomba falls in love with a general’s daughter. After the student protests, he does not see her again until several years later at the hospital where her mother is dying. She finally marries a military man who pays for her mother’s bill. The imprisoned Lomba finds her wedding photo in an old newspaper.	Lomba leaves his solitary room where he has been writing a novel and gets a job as a journalist. Heading back to his room, he sees a fictional piece he had given his editor acting itself out in the streets of Lagos: women communally tearing down a condom billboard to use as firewood.	The boy Kela from Jos goes to Lagos to live with his aunt. He befriends and tells the stories of many people living on “Poverty Street,” including an intellectual and his star-crossed love, a prostitute. He becomes a part of the demonstration that Joshua organizes.	On the day that several important historical figures are assassinated, Lomba and his editor James flee their pursuers. Lomba leaves a party of poets where they had sought refuge and proceeds toward the demonstration.

The novel is framed by the two stories that focus on Lomba’s resistance through writing, the first emphasizing the subversive nature of the imagination, and the final one emphasizing the need for resistance in the face of despair. Between these two extremes, the following

stories progress in more or less chronological fashion, doubling back and overlapping times and characters. The second and third chapters told through the eyes of students emphasize more of the individual resolve that comes out of wrestling with despair, whereas the fifth and sixth chapters, which parallel the second and third, emphasize the action of the community and the hope that is created through communal resistance. The middle (fourth) chapter, "Alice," stitches together the beginning, middle, and end of Lomba's story as presented in the novel: his love affair with Alice as a student; the more mature but ultimately unsuccessful love affair they have four years later while waiting for her mother to die; and finally, her wedding photo that he finds in a newspaper as he languishes in prison. Of their youthful promises of love, he asks "What was a mere promise in the face of all these cataclysms, what was love but luxury? But life's paths are never straight, they wind and turn and convolute and return long-lost friends back together again—only now when they meet things can never be like they used to be: we have gone through so much sea change on our long voyage" (99). Here he acknowledges the "cataclysmic" events that seem to dominate the events of two preceding chapters; however, love which seems to be "but luxury" is given the central placement in the novel. If the "love poems" are the subversive element that allows Lomba to symbolically escape from the prison, the placement of his love affair with Alice at the center of the novel implies the power of the love story to inspire a broader political action. Indeed, it is the love stories sprinkled throughout the novel that give the characters much of their depth. Most of the love stories are tragic: Kela's Auntie Rachel who ran away from Jos to elope, loses her first husband to the Biafra War and her second fiancé to the Abiola riots; Nancy's lover abandons her after she becomes pregnant; Joshua first cannot express his love to Hagar because she is his student and then after she becomes a

prostitute, she is afraid to shame him; Lomba's two lovers Sarimam and Alice leave him for other men; even the brief glimpse we are given of James' wife indicates that their happy marriage is doomed to political separation. The tragic love between Lomba and Alice in the middle chapter encapsulates the complications that love faces in the midst of "cataclysmic" events.

However, as is indicated by the meandering sense of time in the novel and reinforced by the overlapping structure, "life's paths ... wind and turn and convolute and return long-lost friends back together again" (99). If love is complicated by the conditions of political and infrastructural oppression, then it is also symbolic for the connections between people that provoke creativity and imagination. Lomba's love poems to "imagined" women and to Janice enable him to communicate beyond the bounds of his prison. Hagar's appearance at the political demonstration gives Joshua the courage to make his defiant speech. Whereas the first half of the novel focuses more on the wrestling of the individual with oppression, the second half the novel following the central love story focuses more on the effects of communal imagination: the women who rise out of Lomba's story to tear down the billboard, the community demonstration at the secretariat. Like the doomed love affairs, these actions are not necessarily successful but further energize the defiant resolve of the community.

The focus on the multiple stories in the text is reinforced by the multiple narrative voices. There are four main narrators, the unnamed biographer who narrates the story in third person and who assumedly writes the first, middle, and final chapter; Lomba, who narrates the chapters that straddle the central chapter "Alice" and whose diary entries intersperse the unnamed biographer's narrative; the unnamed friend who narrates his death

beyond the grave directly after the story of Lomba's imprisonment; and Kela, who tells the multiple stories of life on Morgan Street, after the story of Lomba's own life on Morgan Street. The arrangement of these voices contribute to the focus on the importance of the writer as an organizer of the communal narrative. Lomba, the writer as witness becomes subject of the unnamed biographer's attention. However, in both the first half of the novel which focuses on the individual experience and in the second half of the novel which focuses on the communal experience, another narrator's voice is inserted between the third person narrative and Lomba's narrative, indicating the necessity of multiple perspectives in any text that places itself in opposition to the attempted monologue of the state. If we read *Waiting for an Angel* alongside *Measuring Time*, Habila's larger project in both novels seems to involve rewriting a history of the nation using the stories of "real people with real weaknesses and strengths" (*Measuring Time* 225). The formal structure and choice of narrative voices in *Waiting for An Angel* reinforces this concern.

Rearranging History

Habila has illustrated, within his novel, the possibilities of imagining alternate realities, of fictions, like the "kerosene-starved" women of Morgan Street, growing minds of their own and invading reality. However, his use of historical events in the novel suggests that he is also using actual history as yet another text to reshape and reinterpret. The narrator of the first chapter of the book notes as an introduction to the fragments of Lomba's prison diary, "Most of the entries he simply headed with the days of the week; the exact dates when he used them, were often incorrect" (*Waiting* 13). The ambiguity about time in narration is continued in Habila's own text. Just as Lomba appropriates the great poets of the Western

tradition and Habila appropriates Soyinka's and other writers' texts, Habila also appropriates historical events and subverts them to the structure of his story. In the novel, Habila not only breaks out of a monologic story, he also de-privileges a strict historicity. In the final chapter, "James," Habila conflates the historical events of 10 years into one week. His editor James Fiki tells him that Nigeria was thrown out of the commonwealth, which actually happened in November 1995 after the government-sanctioned execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activist (Osaghae 305). In the novel, a week after this event, Dele Giwa, the editor of *Newswatch Magazine*, is assassinated by a parcel bomb on the same day that Kudirat Abiola, the wife of the imprisoned president-elect Moshood Abiola, is assassinated by gunmen. Historically, however, the two activists were killed ten years apart: Dele Giwa during the Babangida regime in October 1986 and Kudirat Abiola during the Abacha regime in June 1996 (Maier 63, 28). By throwing out the chronology of events as they happened, Habila not only focuses the story on the concentrated abuse of the military (under two different regimes), but also questions the assumptions of staying "true" to chronological time in telling a story.

In his afterward, Habila acknowledges the liberties he has taken with the chronological order of events, "[N]ot all of the above events are represented with strict regard to time and place—I did not feel obliged to do that; that would be mere historicity. My concern was for the story, that above everything else" (*Waiting* 229). The multivocal story told here takes precedent over the kind of linear story that would be told in the *Brief History of West Africa* Lomba was brought in prison instead of Soyinka's prison notes. Habila's insistence on his own interpretation of history, implies the power inherent in the storyteller who re-imagines and re-appropriates history to indicate new possibilities. The

piling up of these historical events into one fictional day brings the novel to a climax in which Lomba must choose action or despair. Habila's use of history as text indicates an optimistic notion that fiction can affect history—that the reality of one level of narration might escape out into another actual “reality.”²

Not only does Habila take liberty with the historical events, but within the novel, between the individual stories, time seems to stretch and contort itself in strange ways. The time between Lomba's stay at the university and his imprisonment seem much longer than the actual historical tenure of Abacha's regime. He supposedly meets and falls back in love with Alice some time after he becomes a journalist. Yet, two weeks before he is arrested (after he has worked at the *Dial* for two years), his girlfriend Sarimam, with whom he has lived for a year, leaves him. The times between the two love affairs don't quite seem to add up. In the final chapter “James,” Lomba and James spend a long day fleeing the secret police; the chapter ends with Lomba proceeding toward the Morgan Street protest at the Secretariat. Yet in the chapter “Kela,” the protest starts at ten o'clock in the morning and is dispersed a few hours later.

In addition to the irregularities in time between the stories in the novel, there are smudges of memory in the text where doppelgangers of characters appear in scenes where the original characters could not possibly be. When James takes Lomba to see the slave museum in Badagary, “they meet a band of three bored-looking students being shown around by the old, sleepy guide” (197). Years earlier as a student, Lomba had gone there with his two friends, “but halfway through the tour we wandered off, depressed by the guide's mournful and vivid descriptions of how the chains and mouth locks had been used on the slaves” (46). The students he sees seem to be the ghosts of his friends and his younger

self. Similarly, although cut out of the chapter “James” in *Waiting for an Angel*, in the story “Dispossessions” in *Prison Stories*, James and Lomba sit in the bar waiting out the rain. Lomba sees a young man whose eyes “dart round at people’s faces, at people’s hands, and out of the window into the street. He looks like a man waiting for the angel of death, Lomba thinks, death hangs around him like a mist” (*Prison Stories* 144). Only minutes later, the death of Kudirat Abiola is announced, whereas in the chapter “Angel” or the story “Waiting for Angel,” it is a military coup that signals the arrival of the angel of death. Just as Habila palimpsests his stories onto tales told by older African writers, he also layers them onto his own stories. These echoes or ghosts seem to be stains on time, a subversion of the straightforward linear progression of events, suggesting that the stories of these individuals are multiplied throughout the nation. The poem read by the waifish Dunta at the party proclaims that it is time “to cast off our irons” because “Time is / Quicksilver, always fleeting, its favours / Ungathered, and once gone none can recall it, /Delay it, or bend it:” yet this is exactly what Habila is doing in his novel, bending time around to retrieve the individual moments of defiance and hope (*Waiting* 216). In creating a new story by rearranging the fragments of the old, he defies the strict measurements of time that imprison each minute and hour and liberates the story into the more organic time of the sky and stars and rain.

The Deus Ex Machina: The Angel of Death

Although Habila’s appearance into the text does not at first seem to fulfill the obvious function of the deus ex machina, perhaps the hope often offered by a deus ex machina can be found in the act of cracking open a portal between the world of the novel

and the historical Nigeria. If Soyinka's prison superintendent can get into Lomba's prison; if the women in his fictional article can escape the text into Lomba's world, if Helon Habila can enter the world of his character, then what might be able to escape Lomba's world into Habila's world?

I argue that the breaking open the boundaries between Habila's fiction and historical reality are crucial because the understanding of the title lies outside of the novel itself in the actual history of Nigeria. The title of the novel is ironic on several levels. At first glance, the phrase "waiting for an angel" would seem to be a hopeful one, implying the expectation of an angel of deliverance, such as perhaps Lomba's Janice, Alice, or the dreamed of "Liberty" at the end of chapter one. However, the most powerful angel to appear in the novel is not the angel of freedom, but the angel of death, who lurks around every corner. Indeed, in *Prison Stories*, the title of the story in which the angel of death makes its appearance is named "Waiting for Angel," a title which (with the addition of the article "an") became the title of the entire novel. Read in this light, the phrase "waiting for an angel" is bitterly ironic—a euphemism for "waiting for death." It is as if the angel of death has become a tool for the exclusive use of the military rulers to wipe out any form of protest: There are deaths by the dozen both directly and indirectly the result of the military: Bola's family, the community members killed at the demonstration, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the eight Ogoni activists, Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola, Lomba's friend who challenges the soldiers on the border of death.

The Angel of Death is the frightful agent of destiny but also the angel of liberation. This liberation can be read, on one level, as the liberation into death of those suffering in life, like Alice's mother; however, on another level, it can be read as a promise of liberation to those who are living. The alternate realities can perhaps be found in the world of the dead,

but they also can be read as openings into the future, after the end of military rule. The deaths of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Kudirat Abiola, and countless others; therefore, function like the deaths of the martyrs imagined in the chapter “The Angel” to create a powerful social imagination, a dream and communal will for change.

The death of Abacha lies on the fringes of the fictional realm of the novel, mentioned in passing at the end of the first chapter; however, I argue, it is the event to which the title “Waiting for an Angel” refers. In his afterward, Habila writes of the historical events of 1998:

It was a terrible time to be alive. Most intellectuals had only three options: exile, complicity, or dissent. Needless to say, there was more of the first two than the last. But with the killing of Saro-Wiwa, the world was scandalized.... The internal and external anti-military struggles became strident.... Abacha had to go: nobody has a right to impose himself over others in this way. It is morally wrong.

But as with most plots that become too tight and unwieldy, a *deus ex machina* was needed to effect a suitable denouement. It was granted to Nigerians on 8 June 1998, when Abacha died of a heart attack. (228)

The convenient death of Abacha, then, is read as the interference of a *deus ex machina*, a literary tool used by the author to indicate a miraculous salvation from an impossible fix. Elsewhere in his afterward, Habila reads Nigeria in literary terms as a “dystopia” (224). The control of this dystopian text seems to be in the hands of the military—the angel of death is used as a tool by the military to enforce “decrees and whims, human rights be[coming] not rights but privileges to be given or withheld by the new ruler in uniform” (226). When Abacha became ruler, Habila claims “[t]here were more ‘official’ killings, arrests, and kidnappings in those five years than in all the other military years put together” (227). However, if, as Habila implies, the dystopian text can be broken and

rearranged, then the tool of the military can be wrested away from them and used to a new purpose. In this case, the “angel of death” is turned toward the one who unleashed it.

The historical death of Abacha is hinted at several times in the text of Habila’s novel. When the prison superintendent makes bumbling attempts at friendship with Lomba, he becomes the unlikely mouthpiece of a prophecy, “Wait. Hope.... Maybe the leader will collapse and die. He is mortal, after all. Maybe a civilian government will come. Then. There will be amnesty for all political prisoners” (26). Not only does Muftau’s awkward attempts at comforting Habila break down the easy binaries of “good prisoner/evil gaoler,” but it also seems to imply that the characters in the novel have some hand in anticipating and even perhaps causing Abacha’s death. Habila does not mention the circumstances of Abacha’s demise in his afterward, but the dictator’s death of a heart attack while in bed with two prostitutes seems like the invention of a parodist, a bizarre historical incident that supports the notion of fiction intruding into reality.³ Indeed, Habila slyly hints that the angel of death might be able to escape from his novel, in the episode in which the women Lomba wrote about in his fictional article appear outside the window of the *molue*. Although the power of the writer’s imagination is revealed in this scene, the women’s actions go beyond the scene he wrote for them. In Lomba’s story he writes that women tear “down wooden signboards and billboards” (118). However, in the scene that he witnesses, the women come to life, they don’t break down just any signboard but hack into a billboard graced by the “...sensual face of ...[a] man holding a pack of condoms...” (119). The women exist because Lomba has written them, but once alive they take the story further than he had imagined. The writer has started the rebellion through his imagination, but he cannot control it once it is unleashed. The symbolic choice of the condom billboard indicates the anger of

the women at a patriarchal system which thrives on the rape and exploitation of women. Not only is their destruction of the “sensual faced man” poetic justice against the state, whose techniques of terror included the rape of women, but it also slyly foreshadows Abacha’s demise at the hands of women, when he dies of his over-exertions in bed. The sexualized metaphors of rape and suppression are turned backwards and used as a tool to defeat the dictator. This agency of the women to go beyond the story written for them indicates the power inherent when the community takes the vision of the writer as their own: the angel of death becomes a tool in the hands of the community—what Arjun Appadurai calls a social imagination.

Arjun Appadurai differentiates between fantasy, which he claims has an individualistic aura and “carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from projects and actions” and the imagination which “has a projective sense about it... Fantasy can dissipate..., but the imagination, especially when collective can become the fuel for action” (7). Habila’s novel seems to indicate an active engagement with this “collective imagination.” The imagination of the writer or intellectual is significant because he can join together the individual fantasies and dreams of the community into a powerful imaginative form that is the mediating point between individual dreams and communal action.

In an exchange of emails with Courttia Newland published in *Pretext*, Habila claims that “[t]he idea of the solitary artist... is new to Africa. In Africa, most forms of art are participatory: the storyteller would have the audience singing the chorus, for instance, and in drama the audience knows exactly when to join in and form part of the cast.” Even the solitary sculptor carves masks which are the “expression of the highest communal ideals...” (“Writing, Racism, and Community” 65-66). The writer, in Habila’s view, therefore, has a

responsibility to the community. While avoiding the political certainties of earlier post-independence writers, the writer provides a medium that can be appropriated by the communal imagination. As I stated in Chapter Two, women in this text are often also seen as metaphors for the nation. While the angel of death is the most obvious angel of the novel, the other possible angels of the text—the women so often prey to sexual exploitation: Hagar, Alice, Janice, Nancy, the Mayfair girls, the women of Poverty Street—get their comeuppance in the symbolic destruction of the large billboard of the smug condom-wielding man. Furthermore if the women have escaped from Lomba’s imagination, they further seem to wrest control of the text from him. They are the ones writing their own stories now. A *deus ex machina* is, after all, a literary tool. If they are writing their own stories and acting on their dreams, then they become the wielders of the *deus ex machina*—they write the angel.

Just as I read the women’s destruction of the condom billboard as a foreshadowing and symbolic re-enactment of Abacha’s death at the hands of women, Christopher Okonkwo claims that the “woman-implicated death of the last military dictator General Sani Abacha ... is ingeniously re-enacted toward the end of [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel] *Purple Hibiscus*...” when the tyrannical Eugene is poisoned by his wife Beatrice (par. 5).⁴ In Okonkwo’s reading of Adichie’s novel, Beatrice is an “allusion to the powerful Idemili figure, Beatrice, in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*” (par 5) who by the end of Achebe’s novel is seen as the hope for Nigeria, following the deaths of the three male characters. Read together, Okonkwo claims, recent Nigerian novels, whether those layered onto other seminal works, or those contemporary novels that are in unconscious dialogue with each other, together “chart... a liberation imperative and trajectory” (par. 4). Okonkwo

claims that when read alongside Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*, Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* is the one that most "clears a way ... for new beginnings and possibilities;" however, Habila's breaking up and rearranging the linear chronology of his story performs a similar clearing space (par. 11). Although the implied death of the leader is more subtle in *Waiting for an Angel*, the ambiguities of the text contribute to Habila's ironic subversion of triumphant stories.

In the chapter "James," Lomba thinks of the novel that he has been working on "for over three years now but somehow a satisfactory denouement has eluded him" (*Waiting* 194). Perhaps this is because his own fiction is so tangled up in a history in which there is no denouement. Habila writes in his afterward that the historical Nigeria, like a novel, suffered from a "plot too tightly wound" and needed a *deus ex machina* "to effect a suitable denouement" (228). William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* write that "[d]enouement implies an ingenious untying of the knot of an intrigue, involving not only a satisfactory outcome of the main situation but an explanation of all the secrets and misunderstandings connected with the plot complication" (146). In Habila's story, the *deus ex machina* appears but there is no neat tying off of ends. The end of the linear story found at the beginning of Habila's novel is left ambiguous. The story ends with Lomba still in prison. "There is no record of him after" he is transferred to a prison in North. This ambiguity could be read as the triumph of prison state over its inhabitants. As Okonkwo notes, the poet has disappeared "without a trace, and both Babangida and Abacha stay alive, with the nation's democratic hopes dashed again" (par. 10). However, the narrator calls on the power of the imagination, saying that "it is hard to imagine that Lomba died... It is probable that in 1998, when the military dictator Abacha died, and his successor, General

Abdulsalam Abubakar, dared to open the gates to democracy, and to liberty for the political detainees, Lomba was in the ranks of those released” (*Waiting* 43). Just as Lomba imagines Janice into being while he was in prison, the narrator imagines how Lomba “mind soaring above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom” might open his eyes to Liberty. The literal “end” of the novel, the chapter “James,” that leads into the afterward emphasizes Lomba’s defiance in the face of despair. The chronological “end” of the novel which leads into the rest of the “prison” stories ends on a note of hope. Habila’s invocation of the imagination hints that we are to suspect that Lomba lived—that just as other premonitions and dreams have come to life, this one will too.

However, in his use of words like “probable,” and phrases like “[t]his might have been how it happened,” Habila avoids triumphalism; there is still a measure of uncertainty that implies a story that continues beyond the literal boundaries of the texts (43). By “ending” the novel without a clear-cut *denouement*, Habila avoids facile political solutions. Revolt and defiance do not *solve* problems in the novel. Joshua is a reluctant hero, and ultimately his Morgan Street demonstration ends in the death of several of the people he had been attempting to help with his political action, including his sweetheart, Hagar. Sankara’s student revolution rallies the other students but ultimately fails. Although Habila underlines the need for defiance, he is realistic about the probable outcome. Similarly, the miraculous death of Abacha in the actual history of Nigeria, while a momentary release from the tightly wound plot of military dictatorship, did not mean a magical end to Nigeria’s problems. As Habila notes in a 2005 interview with Al’Kasim Abdulkadir:

Things have not changed—the people still are not free, there’s still hunger and repression and injustice and unaccountability. I often hear people saying that at least we are better than we were under the military—but I disagree. There is nothing like half-way freedom or liberty, it has to be all the way or its nothing. Our problem is that we are too easily satisfied. (Abdulkadir, Answer 4)

While the possibility of an “all-the-way freedom” seems improbable, Habila’s focus on the imagination indicates the strength of dreams when they are shared with others. Although the boy Kela wonders if he would be “pulled down when I stood up” for something, he realizes if he wants to achieve anything he must go ahead and dream (*Waiting* 187). As Soyinka noted in his *Pretext* interview with Habila, literature is not “an immediate fixer. Not ... an instant fructifier of our aspirations. It does matter, but let us not get too romantic about literature being mightier than the sword, or expect immediate changes; but in terms of shaping ways of thinking, and ultimately shaping the collective conscious, it does matter” (19). And while, many of the same problems faced under the Abacha regime have continued during the Obasanjo administration, the explosion of creativity in contemporary Nigeria seems to emphasize this focus on the role of the imagination bringing about a change in the collective psyche of the nation. The Obasanjo administration, which in its first incarnation was a military regime, potently illustrates a political cycle from the policies of the military to similar policies under civilian governance. However, if Obasanjo has returned to office, the imaginative critiques of artists and writers have also have returned to plague him. The Afrobeat musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s⁵ feud with Obasanjo during his military administration in *Shuffling and Shmiling, I.T.T., Coffin for Head of State*, and so on, has continued in the quarrel between rapper Eedris Abdulkareem and Obasanjo over Abdulkareem’s albums *Jaga Jaga* and *Letter to Mr. President*. The massive explosion of creativity in the rise and spread of the Nigerian video film, as well as popular music and

fiction, and the bypassing of national structures in communication and networking through the new technologies of cell phone and the internet indicates a rapidly growing and diversifying popular imagination that will make it more difficult than ever for monologic impulses to succeed. A compelling example is the loud public outcry against the 2006 attempt to change the constitution, which would have allowed Obasanjo to run for a third term.

Habila's novel, then, shows the importance of hope and action in the face of despair and potently illustrates how works of the imagination, even if they are seemingly as harmless as love poems, can undermine the very foundations of the prison walls. If Nigeria's evil tyrant can die a cartoon death, then what else might the people of Nigeria dream into being? "After all," as Kela realizes, "the world isn't as big and impossible as we have been taught to believe" (*Waiting* 187).

NOTES:

¹ In Alejo Carpentier's short story "*Viaje a la semilla*" or "Journey to the Seed," an old man Eligio (a reference to the Cuban incarnation of the god Esu-Elegba) inserts a key into the door of a colonial mansion, and the story is reversed. The slave master Marcial lives his life in reverse: rising from his deathbed and growing downward towards birth, until the very house that slavery built is deconstructed and its raw materials shipped back across the sea. Eligio's rewriting of the master's life, reverses the hegemonic gaze of the European and focuses on tensions between the master's story and slave's story. This revision provides a powerful form of resistance both against the system of slavery itself and against the European world view that gave rise to the form of slavery experienced in the Caribbean. While the story in chronological time can be defined as the master's story, the story in reverse is claimed by Esu, creating new insights into the horrors of slavery and subverting the power of the master. Antonio Benitez Rojo breaks down the idea of two types of time in "*Viaje a la semilla*": R-time which moves backwards and is controlled by the old man, and P-time which proceeds in normal time (Benitez Rojo 222). The story in P-time represents the European perspective in which depictions of the Caribbean belong to a "farcical libretto": "the 'blithe Negress,' the 'sensual mulatress'" (Benitez Rojo 220). Eligio's reversing of the story in R-time, on the other hand, focuses on the slave perspective and provides an alternative story. While any analysis of the "time" used in Carpentier's story is specific to "*Viaje a la semilla*," a similar tension takes place in Habila's novel between the "linear" story of Lomba, and the arrangements of the fragments of that story, as read in the novel. Just as the P-time in normal time progression in "*Viaje a la semilla*" represents the story of the colonizer, the linear structure or historical progression of Lomba's life represents a trajectory seemingly determined by the powerful structures of the prison state. However, the fracturing of the story plays a similar function to the old man's reversal of time in "*Viaje a la semilla*" by providing a subversive reinterpretation of events. Almost every chapter in the novel progresses toward tragic circumstances, which the characters twist, at the very last minute, into brief moments of hope.

² The dangerous flip side of this is the re-imagining of history to create what Chinua Achebe calls "malignant fictions like racial superiority," which have justified everything from enslavement to genocide (*Hopes* 148).

³ And indeed some claim that the event was "authored" by clever assassins who gave the prostitutes a poisoned apple to give to Abacha. Whether the poisoned apple episode is actual or an urban legend, it speaks to the ambiguities between fiction and history and the power of myth in creating reality out of fiction/fiction out of reality. Not only does the "powerful man assassinated by prostitute" reflect an action movie cliché, but the apple offered by the tempter resonates with mythic significance. If the forbidden "apple" offered to Eve by Satan and then by Eve to Adam brought about the downfall of humanity, then the offering of the poisoned apple to the dictator both reenacts the fall of man and reverses the direction of power: the women "created" by corrupt men like Abacha subversively bring about his downfall. As with Lomba's harmless poetry, the metaphor becomes reality. (One article representative of the chatter about Abacha's death can be found in Emmanuel Mayah's June 10, 2006, "Hi-Tech Murder," found in *The Sun News On-line*.)

⁴ The poisoned apple story here takes preeminence.

⁵ There are subtle references to Fela Kuti, as another angel, throughout the text. After Bola finds out about the fatal car crash, he stares at a poster reminiscent of posters of Fela, "The picture had been taken on stage; the man had a microphone in his right hand, close to his mouth. He stared back at us the red light above him made his hair fiery, like a burning halo" (62). This image of the haloed man with microphone also imagined as an angel reinforces the irony of the title "waiting for an angel." In his lifetime, Fela never waited for an angel to speak on his behalf, but instead acted with a fiery purpose. Ironically, following the description of the poster, Lomba invokes the "angel of death," whom Bola had seen before his family's deaths just as his friend saw the angel of death before his own death. Although like the unnamed friend Fela acts with defiant purpose, he too is not spared the visitation of the military or the angel of death. The second oblique reference to Fela is in the chapter "Alice" when Lomba goes to "Mercy Hospital in Ikeja to capture the dying paroxysms of a once-famous high-life musician suffering from AIDS for *The Dial's* arts page" (99).

CONCLUSION

My own connection to Helon Habila's novel *Waiting for an Angel* goes back to the time before it was a "novel" published by that name. In November 2001 I attended the annual Association of Nigerian Authors Conference in Port Harcourt. It was there that I first picked up a copy of Helon Habila's collection of short stories, *Prison Stories*, a slim paperback with the black and white image of a barbed-wire spiked wall wrapping the front and back cover. In opening the book, the image flattens out so that the reader physically opens up a space in the prison walls and peers behind/between them. When I read the collection of short stories, it was the first piece of Nigerian literature I had read in which I immediately recognized the setting and identified with the urban characters. Calling it a "fractured novel," I went to every bookshop that I knew of in Jos trying to persuade them to stock it. For the two years I was in Jos from 2001-2003, I was not successful. Ironically, the only place I was able to find additional copies of the book to give my friends was in the international airport in Lagos on my way out of the country.

I was thrilled when Professor Kanchana Ugbabe, who had taught Habila at the University of Jos, told me that the collection was being published by Norton as a novel the next year. In the novel the editor James pessimistically maintains that the people of Nigeria won't buy books because they are too poor to afford them and too illiterate and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police to read. While this judgment is somewhat cynical, my experience attempting to find copies of *Prison Stories* in the city where Habila had completed his first degree in English ironically echoes the difficulties of publication in

Nigeria. The publication by Norton, which while making the novel more accessible to a wider Western audience, also does not overcome this difficulty. Habila himself notes in his online article “The African Writer: Facing the New,” that upon returning to Nigeria, he found that

the price of a copy of my book, when translated into Naira, was almost half the monthly wage of a minimum wage earner. I had to sign a separate contract with my publishers waiving most of my royalties for Nigeria to see that the books are sold at more affordable prices. But even then, the book is still too expensive compared to books produced locally, albeit of a higher quality. I hope in the future to be able to retain the Nigerian rights for my books and have a separate Nigerian edition.

Although Habila’s career demonstrates the difficulty of the publishing industry in Nigeria, it also powerfully provides a real life example of the potential of the imagination to bring about the realization of dreams.

Now five years after I first encountered *Prison Stories*, as I finalize my MA thesis on *Prison Stories* turned *Waiting for an Angel*, my reading of both volumes informs my interpretation of the texts. In this thesis I suggest that, like the image on the cover of *Prison Stories*, the text opens up the porous borders between the world of the characters and the world of the writer and/or reader. By looking at the self-published collection of short stories as well as the novel published by a large Western corporation, I examine Habila’s implications that the imagination has the power to escape the fictional bounds of the text to effect change in a larger context. The uneasy existence of the story in two different versions, one published in Nigeria and one published in London and later New York, highlights the liminality of the story. In the last paragraph of Habila’s afterward to the novel *Waiting for an Angel* published by Norton in 2002, he defends his appropriation of historical events that

have not necessarily been “represented with strict regard to time and place,” saying that “[m]y concern was for the story, that above everything else” (*Waiting* 229).

While in my thesis I described the novel as a powerful tool in recreating history through multiple voices, Habila’s project is not completely unproblematic. First of all, his use of the metaphor of the “puppet text” and the predetermined story is quite successful in portrayal of the existential angst experienced under a military regime. However, my optimistic interpretation about the breaking down of the walls between fiction and reality to allow the escape of characters, of course only works within Habila’s fiction. Ultimately, the characters’ feelings of being trapped within a text are quite perceptive. They are indeed “only characters in a story” (119). The limitations of fiction become apparent; despite all the hints at breakages and fissures between fiction and reality, this is more intellectual game and wishful thinking than it is practical political solution. Second, the concern for the story as being more important than representing events “with strict regard to time and place” works well in the conceit I have set up in the artist wresting control of the story away from the oppressor; however the idea of rewriting history to suit oneself is problematic as well. As Chinua Achebe notes “there are fictions that help and fictions that hinder” (*Hopes* 143). The revision of history for one’s own purposes can quickly become dangerous, as can be seen in the case of those who would like to prove that the Holocaust did not exist, that Turkey did not practice genocide against the Armenians, or, closer to our time, that there is no genocide in Sudan. What keeps Habila’s manipulation of history from being different from the kind he fights against? While I don’t think that this is an immediately solvable problem, I find Achebe’s distinction between two kinds of fiction helpful. Early on in the thesis I set up the

distinction between the monologic fiction of the dictatorship and the more dialogic fictions of those who try to break apart the claims of the state. Achebe says:

What distinguishes beneficent fiction from such malignant cousins as racism is that the first never forgets that it is fiction and the other never knows that it is. Literary fiction does not ask us to believe, for instance, that the Palm Wine Drinkard ... underwent the adventure so vividly described in the novel or indeed that he even existed. And yet reading the novel explains so much to us and affects radically the way we perceive the world thereafter. Malignant fictions like racial superiority, on the other hand, never say, 'Let us pretend.' They assert their fictions as a proven fact and a way of life. (*Hopes* 148)

Ultimately Habila's self-conscious depiction of his fictional Nigeria as a story out of which the characters try to break reveals itself as fiction. The multiple narrators and the fractured nature of the narrative draws attention to its artifice. However this elaborate game of "let's pretend" does provide insights into the possibilities inherent in the imagination, and his fiction captures well the budding of the social imagination that has so recently flowered in contemporary Nigerian music and video-film, as well as political and social consciousness. Habila's concern with the story, in fact, is a concern with multiple stories, as is evident in his initial naming of his self-published volume *Prison Stories*. The back cover text of the first collection notes that "Prison Stories is an unusual collection of organically related stories depicting the exploitative relationship between the ruler and the ruled in Nigeria of the 1990s." This concern with the relationship between "the ruler and the ruled" is influential in the shape that the narrative takes. It is not one authorized story, told by the ruler, but instead multiple "organically related stories" that open up spaces in the larger story, blur the boundaries between fiction and "reality. And although the stories can stand alone, much of their power comes from their relation to the others, the arrangement in the text by a writer who implies that history can be changed by the imagination. If history is

to be rewritten through retrieving multiple perspectives, the breaking of the future event into the long day in which so many historical characters are fictionally killed indicates the importance of the imagination in changing the future.

The cover art of the two editions I analyze here contribute to this ambiguity. In reading *Prison Stories*, readers physically open up the image of the prison walls when they open the book suggesting the power of the story to transcend imprisonment. In my 2002 Norton edition, the cover art suggests a transition similar to the transition in title. The image on the Norton (American edition) cover is of a young man framed in a large clouded sky evoking the motif of natural imagery which play a salvific function throughout the novel. Both titles and both images* are significant in interpreting the spaces explored in Habila's transitory text: the prison walls have been opened up by the writer/reader to the open space of sky, out of which the angel will descend.

* The British Penguin edition has a cover photo of a broken and empty chair. The hard back Hamish Hamilton edition shows a cityscape of Lagos at sunset.

Appendix 1:

A Brief Biography of Helon Habila: ¹

Helon Habila was born in 1967 to a Christian Tangale family in Kaltungo, Gombe State, in the northern middlebelt region of Nigeria. His father, Habila Ngalabak, started out his career as a preacher with white missionaries, and later become a civil servant with the Ministry of Works, which meant that the family often moved around when Habila was a young boy. Habila's mother contributed to the family income with her work as a tailor. Habila completed his primary and secondary education in the city of Gombe. According to the introduction of his interview with Helon Habila "Everything Follows," Frank Bures notes that Habila's skill in weaving stories was noticed early on by his teachers: "In his fifth year of primary school, his teachers ... took him to various classrooms to spin his tales for the other kids."

In the introduction to his short story "The Night of the Monster" on the *Crossing Borders African Writing* website, Habila describes the very first influences on his own storytelling ability, noting that that his "first encounter with fiction was oral, not textual. I grew up in a tenement house with about six other families, and in the nights our mothers would gather all the children, more than a dozen of us, and tell us stories... I can now see the influence of those stories in my fiction—I like compelling story lines that grip you, like the ancient mariner, and force you to listen." However, after learning English at around age seven, he "never stopped reading." The third of seven siblings, Habila describes himself growing up as "the outsider, watching, unable to fully participate. (I am the only one in my

family who is not fluent in my mother tongue). I grew up reading anything I could lay my hands on.... I was going to be a writer, and that was it.” His early influences he cites as the Bible in Hausa and English and later in his teenage years Western classics such as Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Henry James, Dickens, and so on. (Habla, Introduction “The Night of the Monster”). In an *Encompass Culture* interview hosted by Susan Tranter he claims that his literary idols range from “Shakespeare to Soyinka. I am always open to impressions and ideas. The beauty of the novel is that it can absorb as many styles and philosophies as one cares to throw into it, and it gets the better for it.” The authors he still hears “ringing in my sentences and opinions, are Stephen Crane, Achebe, Ngugi, and Shakespeare.”

Although he had fallen in love with stories and literature at an early age, he initially attempted to follow his father’s dream for him to become an engineer, enrolling at the Bauchi University of Technology and then the Bauchi College of Arts and Sciences (Bures and Habla). However, his studies did not interest him, and he finally returned home “directionless and despondent.” He confided to interviewer Jason Cowley “‘I had no idea what I would do or what would become of me,’ he says. ‘I used to quarrel so much with my father.’” In 1989, while still at home “holed up in his room, reading and writing,” Habla’s father and one of his younger brothers was killed in a car accident (Bures and Habla), an incident which seems to inform the heartbreaking story “Bola” in *Waiting for an Angel*.

After the deaths of his father and brother, Habla enrolled in the English BA programme at the University of Jos. There, he thrived. And there he met his friend Toni Kan, a young man from Delta State who had a similar interest in literature and writing. The two young men entered into a friendly rivalry that pushed them further in their literary pursuits. Professor Kanchana Ugbabe remembers how the two students would often come to

her office after class to talk and borrow books. Helon Habila was the quieter one, she said, while Toni Kan was more outspoken, but the two young men seemed to spur each other on. In his article “Another Age” in *Granta*, Habila describes how “each of us wanted to be the first to achieve literary glory. We went in for the same BBC competitions, then hid the rejection slips from each other, claiming our manuscripts had been lost in the post” (152). Shortly after Kan won an essay contest which garnered him a six-week trip to England, in 1992 Habila’s published his first short story “Embrace of the Snake” in an anthology of Nigerian writing, *Through Laughter and Tears* edited by Chidi Nganga(152). However, after the two graduated from the university in 1995, Habila relates that Kan’s life seemed the more glamorous. While Kan moved to Lagos to work for a magazine and soon became a literary “star,” Habila found more prosaic work at the Federal Polytechnic in Bauchi, where he lectured in English and Literature from 1997 to 1999 and published the biography *Mai Kaltungo*.

In 1999, at Kan’s invitation, Habila moved to Lagos and became a columnist and editor in Kan’s romance magazine *Hints*. He went on to become the arts editor at the influential newspaper the *Vanguard* and became involved with the Lagos chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors. It was in 2000 in Lagos that he began to receive serious attention for his literary writing. His poem “Another Age” won first place in the MUSON (Musical Society of Nigeria) Festival Poetry Competition in 2000 and his short story “The Butterfly and the Artist” won the Liberty Bank Prize. His poems “Birds in the Graveyard” and “After the Obsession” were published in the collection of poetry *25 New Nigerian Poets*, edited by Toyin Adewale and published by Ishmael Reed. It was also in 2000, that Habila self published his collection of short stories *Prison Stories* and submitted the opening

story of the collection “Love Poems” for the Caine Prize for African Writing, a substantial prize awarded for a short story published in English by an African Writer. Bures relates how “When the Caine Prize committee wrote back to tell Habila’s publisher that he’d been shortlisted, he replied anonymously. ‘Thanks for your mail. We’ll let the author know immediately. We hope that God will guide the judges in their choice’” (Bures and Habila). After winning the 15,000 pound prize, he received a book contract with Norton to publish the collection of short stories as the novel *Waiting for an Angel*. The novel, which came out in 2002, went on to win the 2003 Commonwealth Literature prize for the best first novel by an African writer. Since publication of *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila has been at the University of East Anglia in Norwich England where he was awarded a writing fellowship for two years and where he is currently doing PhD work on the life of Dambudzo Marechera. He has also been a fellow at the University of Iowa International Writing Program and a Chinua Achebe fellow at Bard College in 2005-2006. In Spring of 2007, he accepted a position as a faculty member of the MFA program in George Mason University’s Department of English. His second novel *Measuring Time* was published by Norton in January 2007.

Appendix 2:

Historical Background:

The history of Nigeria particularly lends itself to the idea of the struggle between the autocratic tendencies of a dictator-led state and the multiple voices within this state that deconstruct it. After gaining independence in 1960 from colonial rule by the British, Nigeria had only a brief interlude of civilian rule before suffering its first military coup in January 1966.² As the coup was led by Igbos, it was interpreted by many as an Igbo attempt to control Nigeria. Northerners began to massacre Igbos living in the North, and the short-lived regime of the Igbo General Ironsi was ended when he was kidnapped and murdered by a group of Northern soldiers in July of the same year. In the midst of this national crisis, which worsened under the national leadership of General Yakubu Gowon, the eastern region of Nigeria, home to most of the Igbos, seceded from the union and declared themselves the Republic of Biafra in May of 1967. This began the civil war, which lasted for three years. Although Biafra was forced to surrender in 1970 and was reintegrated back into Nigeria, the troubled nation continued to live under the military dictatorship of Yakubu Gowon.

Wole Soyinka, who had written his novel *The Interpreters* on the disillusionment of the young educated elite with the corruption of society during the post-independence civilian government, was imprisoned during the Biafra War under the Gowon regime because of his critique of the war. He later wrote in his prison memoir, *The Man Died*, that “this dictatorship has exceeded a thousandfold in brutish arrogance, in repressiveness, in material corruption and in systematic reversal of all original revolutionary purposes the worst excesses of the pre-1966 government of civilians” (15). If the writer helps to create society,

then his imprisonment is symbolic for the military's harsh suppression of stories that do not fit in with their agenda. Interestingly, the military government had attempted to counteract Soyinka's writings with a story that he was suffering from "chronic syphilis" to explain his demise should he "unfortunately" pass away in prison (*Man Died*, Rex Collings, 290-292).³ The story told by the government attempted to both humiliate the poet and bury his story under a deluge of propaganda. Soyinka was released from prison nearly two years after his arrest and has been a vocal plague to military dictatorships ever since; however, his imprisonment was to foreshadow the imprisonment and assassination of writers and journalists in the military regimes to come, and the government's attempt to rewrite the story of anyone who opposed the recurring motif of military regime.

After Gowon was overthrown in a bloodless coup in 1975, and the next military head of state Murtala Mohammed was assassinated in 1976, General Olusegun Obasanjo, in 1979, became the first military head of state in Africa to hand over to an elected civilian government. The Shehu Shagari civilian government lasted for only four years before Nigeria was plunged back into the morass of military rule. General Muhammadu Buhari's overthrow of the civilian government in 1983 was announced by Brigadier Sani Abacha, an event that foreshadowed the next two coups, for when General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew the Buhari regime in 1985, it was again Sani Abacha who announced the coup. Babangida's regime sunk the country further into corruption and poverty. By the early 1990s, against a background of union strikes, student demonstrations, and uprisings in the oil producing Niger Delta, Babangida bowed to pressure and held elections. On June 12, 1993 after what was widely considered one of the most orderly elections thus far held in Nigeria's history, Babangida annulled the election results before the candidate M. K. O.

Abiola's landslide victory could be announced. In August 1993 after general outrage from the citizens of Nigeria and the international community, Babangida reluctantly handed over to Ernest Shonekan, a civilian he had appointed to head the "interim" government, set in place to eventually transition to an elected government. Osaghae notes that Shonekan was left with a "very hostile environment—continued strikes, demonstrations, lack of legitimacy and fears of war" (262). He was also left with an angry president-elect Abiola, who continued to insist upon his legitimate claim to the presidency.

The interim government was short-lived. In November 1993 Abacha, in a triumphant echo of the past two coups, again announced a military coup. This time it was himself that he announced as the head of state. If Soyinka had found Gowon's regime oppressive, Abacha dazzled with his excesses. Soyinka in *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* calls Abacha, who had accused him of treason and ordered his death, "...a midget slavemaster ... who actually boasts of power over the most heavily populated, most talented slave market that Africa has ever known" (*The Burden* 73). The military had become the defining structure to Nigerian society—always in the background—but with Abacha it became an unbearable melodrama. Abacha performed with garish theatre his acts of brutality in front of the world: most infamously hanging the famous activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa along with eight other Niger Delta activists on trumped up murder charges. The artist who tried to challenge the monolithic structure with an alternate perspective was hung by his neck until he was dead—not an encouraging beginning for young up-and-coming novelists. As Helon Habila's newspaper editor James Fiki notes to his new journalist Lomba, who is an aspiring novelist, "You won't find a publisher in this country because it'd be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which

nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read” (*Waiting* 194). When Abacha died as flamboyantly as he had lived out his brutal life, of a heart attack while in bed with two prostitutes (an incident that fueled the imagination of previously suppressed writers) new hope sprang upon Nigeria.⁴ In the years that followed, Helon Habila self-published his “collection of organically related short stories,”⁵ *Prison Stories*, under the imprint Epik Books. Winning the 2001 Caine Prize for African Writing for the first story in his collection “Love Poems,” the work was published by Norton in 2002 as the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, which went on to receive a Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2003 (Tranter, encompassculture.com). The novel not only reflected upon the past ten years of Nigeria’s history but provided an exciting new look at the story told by the state as a defining prison and the artist as responsible to break out of that prison by retelling the story in his own words.

Appendix 3:

A Chronological Reconstruction of the Novel:

When the short story collection *Prison Stories* was published by Norton as *Waiting for an Angel*, the basic structure of the story arrangement was not changed. The stories are now a little more closely related. A few more connecting details have been inserted into each chapter, and the names of the stories have been changed to names of featured characters. The story “The Iron Gate” was removed from the novel and one new chapter “Alice” was added.

Reconstructed in chronological order, the novel tells the story of a young man Lomba from the north of Nigeria who comes to university in Lagos. He quickly becomes adopted into his roommate Bola’s family, as Bola shows him around Lagos. One day as he, Bola, and another friend explore the beach they come across a marabout who tells their fortunes. The marabout tells Lomba that he will go to prison and the unnamed friend that he will see the angel of death when his time comes to die. Soon after this, Lomba meets the beautiful daughter of a general, Alice, and has a brief love affair with her before disaster strikes. The nation is in turmoil over the unending “transition” programmes in which the military promises to hand over to civilian rule. The students are demonstrating. During his involvement in the student demonstrations, one morning, Bola wakes up from nightmares about a car accident, and he and Lomba race home to check on his family. They find that Bola’s mother, father, and sister have been killed in an accident with a military vehicle on the road to Ibadan. Bola breaks down under the grief and in deep shock, he goes out into the streets repeating word for word the protests the student leader had been shouting the day

before. He is arrested and beaten before being rescued from the psychiatric hospital by his uncle. Lomba goes back to the student hostel, only to find that the military has invaded the university, raping the girls and ransacking the rooms. Lomba's writing has been ripped out of his bags and trampled by boots. Lomba drops out of university.

A few months later, Lomba's friend sees the angel of death in his sleep and knows that he will die that day. From a bar, he watches a thief burnt to death by an angry crowd. Suddenly there is static on the television. There has been a military coup. The bar empties as people nervously make their way home. The man stays in the bar until two soldiers come. When he refuses to leave and then defiantly attacks them, they shoot him.

In the meantime, Lomba has spent two years living in a slum on Morgan Street trying to write a novel. A thief and a prostitute are his closest neighbors. Finally, desperate for a job, Lomba approaches the editor of *Dial* magazine who had published an editorial Lomba had written while still in university. As part of his job interview, he writes an article about Morgan Street, where he lives, and on the way home from the office sees the fictional ending from his article acting itself out: an army of women tear down a billboard of a condom advertisement. After an interview at a hospital, Lomba meets his old lover Alice staying with her dying mother. Lomba and Alice strike up a friendship again, but when he asks her to marry him, she tells him she cannot because she has promised to marry the older military man who is paying her mother's hospital bill.

Around the same time, a teenage boy, Kela, from Jos is sent to Lagos to live with his aunt and study for his School Certificate exams, after his father catches him smoking marijuana. In Lagos, he helps his aunt run her restaurant and takes lessons to help him pass his secondary school exams. His tutor Joshua is a writer and intellectual who is in an

impossible love affair with Hagar, a former student turned prostitute. Kela listens to the life stories of many of the members of the community and sits in on meetings as the neighborhood plans a demonstration.

Lomba's girlfriend Sarimam has broken up with him, and his editor James has convinced him to cover the demonstration Joshua is planning, even though Lomba usually writes for the arts and culture page. The day of the demonstration, Lomba is with James when they learn that the Dial offices have been burned down, that Dele Giwa and Kudirat Abiola have been assassinated,⁶ and that there is a warrant out for James arrest. Seeking refuge at a surreal party of writers and artists, Lomba briefly meets Helon Habila, the author of the novel Lomba inhabits, and a group of Habila's real-life friends. Finally, escaping the party as the soldiers knock at the gates, Lomba proceeds toward the demonstration that Joshua has organized. At the demonstration, Joshua is turned away from the local government secretariat but when he sees his sweetheart Hagar there in support, he is energized and gives an impassioned speech. The soldiers surround the demonstration and fire tear gas. Several of the community members are killed including Hagar. Lomba is arrested and held indefinitely in prison.

Finally, we come to the first chapter of the novel. Lomba has been in prison for several years when his writing is discovered by the prison superintendent. Although, he is initially beaten, when the prison superintendent notices that Lomba writes poetry, he puts him to work writing love poems for his son's teacher. Lomba begins bowdlerizing Sappho and sending poetic SOS's. The woman figures out that the poetry is the work of a prisoner and urges the superintendent to give his name to Amnesty International. The narrative ends ambiguously at the end of the first chapter. It is uncertain what happens to Lomba.

NOTES:

¹ This information in this brief biography has been gleaned from multiple sources: Toyin Adewale ed., “The Poets,” *25 New Nigerian Poets* (2000); Jason Cowley, “To finish my book was an act of will” (2001); Frank Bures and Helon Habila, “Everything Follows: An Interview with Helon Habila” (2004); Helon Habila with Susan Tranter, “Helon Habila” (n.d.); Helon Habila, “Another Age”(2002); Helon Habila. Introduction. “The Night of the Monster” (n.d.); Helon Habila. Email to author. (2006); “Biographies,” *Timbuktu, Timbuktu: A Selection of Works from the Caine Prize for African Writing* (2002); Professor Kanchana Ugbabe. Personal conversation with the author (2006).

² Unless noted otherwise, the historical section was written from my general knowledge of Nigerian history, with the aid of the following sources: Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*; Karl Maier, *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*; Helon Habila, “Afterward,” *Waiting for an Angel*.

³ This anecdote was related in Appendix A “From the Horse’s Mouth” in the 1972 Rex Collings publication of *The Man Died*. “From the Horse’s Mouth” was removed from the paperback Spectrum edition most easily found in Nigeria. Unless otherwise noted, the other quotes from *The Man Died* in this thesis are from the Spectrum edition.

⁴ Abacha’s death has often been described in supernatural terms: Journalist Karl Maier quotes a Nigerian businessman as calling it a “coup from heaven” (Maier 4). In his short story “The Last Sleep” published in the Association of Nigerian Authors anthology *Cramped Rooms and Open Spaces*, Sunday Ayewanu writes of the President of Benue, obviously based on Abacha, who engages in evil magic arts and is finally overcome by mammy water spirits disguised as foreign prostitutes (16-28.) In the afterward of *Waiting for an Angel*, Helon Habila calls Abacha’s death a *deus ex machina* (228).

⁵ Reference comes from the back cover copy of *Prison Stories*.

⁶ Historically, these two figures were assassinated nearly ten years apart. Dele Giwa under the Babangida regime and Kudirat Abiola under the Abacha regime.

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