

1. Witnessing Violence in Literature and Humanitarian Discourse

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Abstract

Beginning with Heidegger's definition of violence as that which exceeds and reformulates normality, this essay questions how violence can be ethically represented and interpreted. In their ability to establish norms and then carry us beyond the bounds of the familiar, novels are uniquely suited to represent violence as norm-shattering. Contrasting tendencies in contemporary novels representing historical political violence with humanitarian writing, the essay uses the figure of the reader as witness to contrast the ways readers' responsibility is constructed. I argue that many new works of historical fiction construct an imagined global readership whose non-violent normativity is meant to ground the novel and establish a contrast with extremes of political violence, discussing Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an example.

In *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Didier Fassin argues that we have entered a new era of humanitarian action, the era of the witness. Telling the story of suffering has become part of the humanitarian act itself. For the sake of highlighting the extremity of suffering, humanitarian organizations often publicize the most shocking experiences – the most violent, most pointless acts and the most vulnerable victims – but stripped of a context that could establish peace and compassion as norms against which this violence is contrasted, extreme portrayals of violence may normalize what they strive to condemn.

In Sophocles's *Antigone*, the chorus pronounces on the nature of humanity, in a passage that has come to be called the "Ode on Man."

There is much that is strange, but nothing
that surpasses man in strangeness.

...

He wearied even the noblest of gods, the Earth,
indestructible and untiring,
overturning her from year to year,
driving the plows this way and that
with horses.

And man, pondering and plotting,
snares the light-gliding birds
and hunts the beasts of the wilderness
and the native creatures of the sea.
With guile he overpowers the beast
that roams the mountains by night as by day,
he yokes the hirsute neck of the stallion
and the undaunted bull.

...

Everywhere journeying, inexperienced and without issue,
he comes to nothingness.

Through no flight can he resist
the one assault of death

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger places the “Ode” in the center of his definition of humanity as violent (Heidegger 1959, 146-148). In the context of the play, Kreon has taken control of Thebes following his nephews’ battle to the death. He has forbidden anyone to bury the body of one of the brothers, Polynices. Just after daybreak the following morning, a guard comes to tell Kreon that his order has been disobeyed. Polynices’ body has been ceremonially covered with dust. Kreon threatens to kill the guard if he does not find the person who was so bold to disobey him. Thankful to have escaped the king’s wrath for the time being, the guard leaves the stage. The old men of the chorus are then left alone to speculate on the nature of man. They conclude, “There is much that is strange, but nothing that surpasses man in strangeness.”

In Heidegger’s interpretation of these lines, the key term is “deinotaton,” the strangest. “This one word,” he says “encompasses the extreme limits and abrupt abysses of his being” (1959, 149). The root of this word means terrible, wondrous, awe-ful in the old sense of the term. Heidegger reads it as “powerful in the sense of one who uses power, who not only disposes of power but is violent in so far as the use of power is the basic trait not only of his action but also of his being there.” Man, in his essential violence, “gathers the power and brings it to manifestness” (149-150). Violence, for Heidegger, is an innate capacity whose presence in human beings joins us to the forces that move earth and waves, light-gliding birds and hirsute stallions, but our awareness of this power as part of our Being elevates it within us, making us “strangest,” most awe-ful of all, not least of all because we know we come to nothing in the end. The chorus’s speech offers several examples of fundamental violence to support this reading. “Overturning,” “driving,” “plotting,” “snar[ing],” humanity is pictured as dominating through violence a world of competitive, powerful forces. But for Heidegger it is not the habitual and necessary overpowering of nature through agriculture or hunting that constitutes our essential violence. These actions expose our power in a familiar way. Rather, man is most violent when, “tending toward the strange in the sense of the overpowering,” he “surpasses the limit of the familiar” (151). According to this definition, violent actions expose as possible things that the familiar workings of the world treat as impossible.

In light of Heidegger’s definition, I want to question how violence can be ethically represented and interpreted. The question of what violence registers as normal or exceptional is an essential one for the representation of political violence in humanitarian discourse and fiction as the proportion of the world’s population effected by such violence steadily increases. In 2016, “more countries experienced violent conflict than any time in nearly 30 years” (UN and World Bank, 2018, xvii). In 2021, 1 in 33 people “need humanitarian assistance and protection.” In 2020, it was 1 in 45 (OCHA, 2021, n. p.). Although the causes of this need are diverse, global challenges such as climate change and resource extraction are increasingly associated with violence. I argue that, in their ability to establish norms and then carry us beyond the bounds of the familiar, novels are uniquely suited to represent violence as norm-shattering. This is not to deny that novels can also work in the opposite way and present violence as normative, but to highlight the implications that a central feature of novels – their ability to evoke a world – has for the theme of this volume. In contrast, because of their reliance on imagines and quick, consumable narratives and images, humanitarian writings rely on violence’s excess of meaning and emotion to startle readers out of apathy and therefore risk instrumentalizing a person’s suffering as a means to relieve it. Both because of the constant imbalance between needs and the funding required to meet them and because of the persistence of structural inequalities that nurture political violence, humanitarian publications must continue to publicize such narratives in order to do the work of bearing witness, but they face the risk of normalizing victim status for certain people groups. Denis Kennedy (2009) calls this a “fundamental humanitarian dilemma” because “if images of suffering are a means towards a principled end...they are also a powerful tool of social

construction” (n.p.). My intention in contrasting novels to images or brief narratives published by humanitarian organizations is not to critique the way any particular organization approaches the formidable challenge of representation. Rather, I want to highlight the potential of many contemporary historical novels to complement these organization’s attempts to relieve and prevent suffering.

Strange, Human Violence

There are several implications of Heidegger’s definition of violence that make it useful for considering ethical ways of interpreting and narrating violence. First, he implies that there are no non-violent people; there are people who have not exercised their violent capacities. This has been confirmed with disturbing regularity by social psychologists. The Milgram experiments at Yale in 1963 and the later Stanford prison experiments in 1971 are the two most famous examples. Fascinated by Adolf Eichmann’s assertion that he “did not feel [himself] guilty” or “responsible” for the deportation of Jews to concentration camps, Stanley Milgram sought to determine what percentage of people would physically harm another person if commanded to by an authority (Eichmann 1962, n.p.). Participants were told that they were to help with an experiment in memorization. A “learner” would be given word pairs to memorize. As “teacher,” participants were instructed to shock the learner when pairs were wrongly remembered. The shocks that the learner pretended to receive ranged from “slight shock” to “Danger: XXX.” In 1961, students predicted 1-2% of participants would use the highest level of shock. But as Milgram demonstrated, 65% of us, statistically, are willing to shock “learners” into silence and presumably death when someone in a professional wardrobe tells us to. This percentage has remained the average as the experiment has been imitated with thousands of people worldwide (Zimbardo 2009, xv-xvi).¹ When Phillip Zimbardo reflects on his own Milgram-inspired Stanford prison experiments in relation to the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal, he decides that the “potentially toxic impact of bad systems and bad situations” make “good people behave in pathological ways that are alien to their nature” both in history and in experimental settings (195). As the narrator says in Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, “you” – we - “should be able to admit to yourselves that you” would probably have followed orders in these situations too. “I think I am allowed to conclude, as a fact established by modern history, that everyone, or nearly everyone, in a given set of circumstances, does what he is told to do; and pardon me, but there’s not much chance that you’re the exception” (2016, 20). The disturbing excess of violence is present through the capacity Heidegger identifies even when no violence is being performed.

A second implication of Heidegger’s definition is that there are people who have exercised their capacity to powerfully re-frame reality in ways that resist political violence. As Slavoj Žižek points out, according to Heidegger, Antigone’s burying of her brother is the truly violent act (60). Martin Luther King’s stubbornly peaceful marches in Birmingham, Alabama violently rearranged the country’s perspective on the need for civil rights in the south, particularly after hundreds of children were arrested for marching in 1963. The peaceful protesters in Peshawar’s *Storytellers’ Bizarre* (Qissa Khawani) violently stirred action for independence among India’s Muslim population after hundreds of unarmed Pashtun people stepped across a growing line of bodies to be shot by British imperialists in 1930. These things – the mobilization of over a thousand children for non-violent protest, the “cool courage” (Ghandi’s term) of protestors challenging British soldiers to look at them, unarmed and shoot – exceeded what contemporary onlookers

¹ In 2016, researchers at the University College of London published results of a Milgram-style experiment involving real electronic shock and discovered that “coercion ... reduced the neural processing of the outcomes of one’s own actions. Thus, people who obey orders may subjectively experience their actions as closer to passive movements than fully voluntary actions” (Emilie A. Caspar, et. al).

thought was possible. “The violent one, the creative” one, Heidegger writes, “sets forth into the un-said---breaks into the un-thought, compels the unhappened to happen and makes the unseen appear” (161). Calling these non-violent acts “violent” is not meant to reduce violence to a metaphysical level that fails to distinguish between harm in the flesh and symbolic violence (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” 148). Nor is it meant to place non-violent protest on a continuum with revolutionary violence merely because it sometimes succeeds in effecting change. I would disagree with both of these positions. But it is worth remembering that that same great, strange force Heidegger identifies, whatever we call it, can be used in acts of protest that are, physically speaking, defiantly non-violent.

Physical violence frequently has the quality of revealing new possibility as well. History demonstrates that physical violence is hard for most people to perform. Sociologist Randall Collins points out that “Most of the time...the barrier of tension/fear...makes violence difficult to carry out...It is much more common to carry out...conventional gesturing” (338) – whining, trash talk. This is why, in most cases, performing violence requires something that pushes the perpetrator beyond the bounds of regular patterns of interaction. This might be chemical (soldiers taking stimulants; Kamienski 2016), emotional (the contagion of victorious emotion during the 1937 Nanking massacre; Collins 2008, 98-99), or situational (isolation in intimate partner violence; Johnson 2010, 16). Soldiers undergo intense training to make taking the first shot in battle possible (Grossman 2009, 13-14, et. al.). In most scenarios today, then, physically harming another person is violent not only in the conventional sense of physical brutality but also in Heidegger’s sense of manifesting power in a way that “surpasses the limits of the familiar.” For the victim, violence reconfigures their operative knowledge about what to expect from others. For the perpetrator, it reconfigures what one knows oneself to be capable of. And for the onlooker - the witness - violence either alters a norm or secures an act further as exceptional.

But this leads to a third and final implication of Heidegger’s broad definition of violence, and the one that is most important for contemplating the alteration of norms through humanitarian discourse and fiction; the same degree of harm strikes us as more or less violent depending on our proximity and the extent to which harm is normalized in a given situation. The familiar can be made to include physically harming others. What becomes familiar in times of genocide, for example, differs jarringly from the familiar safety in which most academic readers live. Furthermore, the suffering of people in some regions or some demographics has become so familiar that the excess of what those individuals endure may not register with some reading audiences. Zizek recalls that in 2006, *Time* magazine ran a cover story about “the Deadliest War in the World,” namely the destruction of over 5.4 million Congolese people in political violence between 1996 and 2006 (2008, 2). But as he says “none of the usual humanitarian uproar followed, just a couple of readers’ letters – as if some kind of filtering mechanism blocked this news from achieving its full impact in our symbolic space” (2). Spread out over a number of years and nine countries, these deaths were accommodated within the familiar. To put it more bluntly, the American public was used to people dying in Africa. Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop makes a similar point about news of the Rwandan genocide. “In an Africa viewed as the natural site of all the world’s disasters, the Rwandan massacres were just one more tragedy to add to those in Somalia, Algeria, and Liberia. This attitude demonstrates a racism so complacent that it no longer even knows it exists” (2004, 110). He continues by adding that “Having said all this, honesty compels me to admit that the Rwandan tragedy provoked, if possible, even less interest in Africa than in the rest of the world....The truth is, all of Africa’s failures have caused the continent to lose its self respect.” (111). In both of these examples, war in the Congo and genocide in Rwanda registered with (at least some) American and African publics as normal.

The Humanitarian Dilemma

This leads us to the problem that humanitarian organizations face in trying to rouse support. How can violence that victims experience as world-shattering be represented in a way that disrupts the day-to-day habits of people not immediately effected? In globalized media spaces information can move nearly instantaneously. There are greater than ever technological possibilities for communicating one person's experience of violence to another person, but how to break through the buzz of everyday life to make someone hear it without being sensational or exploitive? Humanitarian organizations rely on shock and the cultural construction of sentiment to move potential donors and volunteers. As Heide Fehrenbach and David Rodogno write in their introduction to the *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, "humanitarian imagery is *moral rhetoric* masquerading as visual evidence" (2015, 6). It says (to expand the rhetorical metaphor) this suffering is unacceptable. It is "unjust yet amenable to remedy" (6). In order to compel action, it must display a level of suffering that exceeds a viewer's norms for acceptable levels of suffering. The same is true of humanitarian narratives. And it is rare to see humanitarian narratives not accompanied by the moral rhetoric of images.

In a perverse adaptation of the Kantian sublime, the excess of suffering can be qualitative or quantitative. Over four million textile workers in Bangladesh working 75% of their waking life for somebody else's profit (Worker Rights Consortium 2020, 30-32). Thirteen and a half million Syrian refugees are internally or internationally displaced from their homes (World Vision 2021). 43,000 Rohingya parents are missing and presumed dead in Myanmar (Barron 2018). Civilian casualties in Iraq number 209,000 (Iraq Body Count 2021). In each of these cases, an organization could zero in on one worker, one displaced person, one orphaned child or other family member left behind and portray the qualitative excess of his or her suffering. Most robust humanitarian campaigns online combine these numbers with individual stories, or at least photos of individuals. In the following section, I analyze two examples of this qualitative/quantitative pairing and consider how each relates to the normalization of violence.

My first example is the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) "Children Under Attack" campaign website, which strives to represent a range of conflicts, many of which have gone on for all or most of these children's lives. It opens with a photo of a girl in a refugee camp. She is looking directly into the camera with a determined expression, balancing herself on rocky ground against a tent, her ballet pink patent leather shoes scrupulously clean. No information about her name, age, location or background is given. Clicking the link to "Afghanistan" to see if there might be more information there, I find another picture of a child about the same age, this time a boy off-center, peering over a nest of clothing around his neck, his shadow beside him on the wall and darkness in the room behind. The other clickable country in the first paragraph of the website is Yemen. The child pictured there, also a boy, is younger. He is abstracted from his surroundings to the extent that one cannot guess where he is. There are concrete steps behind him, but no hint of where they lead. His eyebrows crease in the manner of concerned adults, and the script beside his photo reads: "Access to education provides a sense of normalcy for children in even the most desperate contexts and protects them from multiple forms of exploitation. Yet more than two million school-age children are now out of school as poverty, conflict and lack of educational opportunities disturb learning." I click the link beneath the text, which says "Read 'Education Disrupted', presumably a report that will contain this boy's story, but instead find a photo of another unnamed boy in a decimated classroom.

In the organization's "Ethical Reporting Guidelines: Key Principles for Responsible Reporting on Children and Young People," UNICEF provides specific guidance regarding the use of names. "All children should have their identity (name and nationality) respected in visual

representation.” This includes not publishing the names of children victimized by or accused of perpetrating sexual abuse. Child combatants and children charged with crimes must also have their names and visual identity obscured. On the other hand, the guidelines suggest that using a child’s identity may sometimes be in their best interest, for example, when they are “engaged in a psychosocial program and claiming their name and identity is part of their healthy development” or when the “child initiates contact with the reporter.” The child in the decimated classroom must belong to one of these categories because as I continue my search in the pages about educational needs in Yemen, I find his story. His name is Ahmed, and he is 12-years old. He is pictured at Al-Hamzi school, Hajjah in 2021. The statistic of two-million children being out of school is repeated here, followed by statistical evidence of how the situation has worsened since 2015 and a numerical account of teachers not being paid. To the right is a link for multi-media materials, but Ahmed’s story is not there. It is at the bottom of the general page about the Yemen crisis. The video is one minute and fifty-six seconds long and shows Ahmed in a waistcoat and white shirt discussing being frightened about attending school after a bombing in the same classroom in which he was photographed. The video switches to a view from the back of girls running to enter a school, followed by an interview with Yahya Al-Atr, the school principal. He is sitting in a student desk in a classroom with standing walls, but rubble is visible in the windows to his right. He mentions the students’ morale being damaged, but also their determination to return to school. He describes how they resumed school “in the rubble, inside the tents and under the shade of the trees.” In the second minute of the video, Ahmed’s father promises “I will do whatever I can to help my son complete his education.” We see Ahmed writing and showing writing to a younger boy wearing a suit coat while he states that his “dream is to graduate from university.”

The video situates Ahmed in a discoverable history. It situates him in a family and a school community. It highlights his hope for the future without ignoring the psychological damage of his past. Taken as a whole, the video foregrounds features of Ahmed’s life that establish the norms for childhood flourishing (education, family, community, hope) and highlights the agency of victims, including Ahmed and other children, while also informing viewers about the bombing and showing its consequences. Operating within the humanitarian dilemma, the video succeeds as well as any two-minute piece of craftsmanship possibly could, but if I step back from the video, I must recognize that I spent several minutes reading statistics and looking at photos of nameless children before I found Ahmed’s story. In the world of the UNICEF website, malnutrition and lack of access to education are the norm. Evidence of political violence is present in the rubble outside the window or as part of somebody’s past, but in the present potential donors are asked to deal with the practical problems of getting children fed and schooled. The background, the violence itself, becomes the norm against which the exceptional feat of educating children in tents and rubble must be achieved.

My second example is the UK-based charity Survivors Fund (SURF), which aids Rwandan genocide survivors. The attempt to render violence violent, in Heidegger’s term of something breaking through the familiar, sometimes juxtaposes survivor testimonies with the larger image of a violent world. The matter-of-fact language that survivors typically use conjures the gap between the extremity of violence presented through statistics or broader description and the language of one person whose expectations for what is possible have been violently rearranged (Fassin 2011, 207). SURF collaborates with the UN on an “Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda” to collect testimonies and make them publicly available in English. Mary Kayitesi Blewitt, who lost fifty family members, initiated the Survivor Testimony project, and they are now available on the UN “Outreach Programme” website under “Resources” in a simple PDF format, with each testimony arranged by the victims’ first names. One of the testimonies is from a woman named Donatha, excerpted here:

On May 5 (1994), we heard many people singing in the road. They were wearing banana leaves and when they arrived at our house, they ordered us outside. I asked God to receive us into his kingdom. They asked the old lady to go back into the house and sleep. They followed her in, covered her with all the clothes that were in the room, poured petrol on her and set her alight. I tried to run away, but at a roadblock I was caught by two men. They asked me if I was from the house. I said no, but they nevertheless brought me back, raped me and locked me in the toilet. When they left, I escaped and went to the neighbors.

The full recorded testimony is a page and a half long, presented on its own in a plain black and white document with no commentary. No pictures accompany individual accounts. The Survivors' Fund has done their best to let the testimonies stand forth unmediated. There is enough here to learn something of Donatha's world – her faith, her resilience in moments of crisis. We may note she describes the violence done to the old lady in greater detail than her own suffering. But there is no way to know what her world looked like before the attack when she was just Donatha and not Donatha the genocide and rape survivor. Only her status as a survivor and witness could bring her to my attention at all although she is just about my age. I was a junior in high school May 5th, 1994. It was a Thursday. With a certain amount of imagination, I can set those Thursdays side by side and link her world and mine. But inevitably she appears in my world now as someone I could potentially help. I cannot imagine what she would have done on the Friday if that Thursday had not happened. Although she has come within the logic of visibility through which my world operates, that generative logic flounders in trying to produce more than a day in her life, the day she became a victim.

Worlds of Literature

Exceeding norms in an ethical way is also a challenge faced by contemporary authors trying to awaken their readers to histories of political violence. Robert Eaglestone characterizes contemporary African literature in English as “‘engaged literature’ in a renewed Sartrean sense. That is, they are not simply affective works; they are also aimed explicitly at pricking Western consciousness” (*Broken Voice* 2017, 136). They have a humanitarian goal. Much contemporary literature about violent histories globally is also “engaged literature” in this sense. Examples include Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Shadows*, which begins in Nagasaki and ends in Guantanamo Bay, or Thi Bui's portrayal of the Vietnamese-American War and the subsequent refugee crisis in her illustrated memoir *The Best We Could Do*. The presence of novels about Biafra or the sufferings of Afghanistan's Hazara on the *New York Times* bestseller list indicate that English-language readers are engaging with the problem of global political violence to an unprecedented degree. But it is hard to know if this engagement extends beyond a voyeuristic interest in other people's problems. Novels about political violence offer an elevation of emotional, moral and intellectual intensity. Other people's crises awaken us to the joys of tucking the children in or a peaceful morning coffee. They invite the safely sublime experience of knowing death is coming but not yet. The fact that the violence narrated relates to actual flesh may heighten the intensity of these joys further without a reader taking responsibility for the fact that that violence happens in an actual shared world.

It is worth thinking for a moment about what it means to share a world. Alain Badiou is convinced that we do not share a world anymore (2012, 61-62). To have a shared world would mean to share a “logic of visibility,” but today “the world deprives the vast majority of human beings of their visibility” (64). There are an endless multiplicity of worlds in which what is present and what is possible follow independent and irreconcilable logics or the fluctuating logic

of meeting immediate needs. Violence no longer occurs in a place or to a person with a past, not even to a “refugee” or a “worker.” To designate victims in this way is to give them a name. He says now their name is only “excluded” and part of what they are excluded from is a place in the visible world (64). Those vast numbers of people embroiled in political violence are present for so many of us as a kind of placeholder. We know that they exist and we know that we cannot know who they are or where, how many. Because their existence and our confidence in their continual invisibility are equally certain, they occupy an epistemological no man’s land, present and comfortably indeterminant.

Novels, I think, are uniquely capable of granting visibility. To turn to another essay by Heidegger, works of art manifest a world. He says that “The unconcealedness of beings – this is never a merely existent state, but a happening” (2013, 52). It occurs when a work of art manages to “transport us out of the realm of the ordinary” (64). Art discloses truth by “open[ing] a world and keep[ing] it abidingly in force” (43). Heidegger’s rethinking of art begins with his rethinking of the world and our relationship to it. When we wake up in the morning, we are not merely ourselves, present in clean autonomous subjectivity. We are in a bed, windows open or closed, with someone or without. We are in a body – cold, warm, comfortable or comfortless. When we hear a sound, it is the coffee perking downstairs. It is not a sensual phenomenon that we then secondarily interpret as coffee perking. We are, in every waking moment within a world already interpreted, whose presence provides the terms through which we see ourselves. And this world, our world, does not consist really of windows, beds, and coffee percolators. “World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen” (43). Nor is it “an imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things” (43). Heidegger insists that the “world *worlds*” (43). It rises up prior to our representation and shapes the way that representation and all forms of decision-making become possible for us. It structures our relationship to time, space, other people and ourselves.

If Badiou is right that this process of worlding no longer unfolds with a logic that succeeds in revealing truth, it is not because the coffee, bed, partner and window are not there in the usual way. It is because alongside the givenness of that world we are aware of other worlds so radically different from our own that we cannot access the logic of that world’s unfolding. It is not that if we met Ahmed in his shattered schoolroom that we could not experience recognition of one another in love or hate and thereby see that other person within our world as it unfolds. We could do that. But that meeting does not seem part of our possible future. Furthermore, there are eleven million children in Yemen with inadequate food and shelter following the outbreak of war there in 2015. Even if we did go, and Ahmed or his class of thirty children achieved visibility in our world, there would be others who we would know to exist in some nameless way, in some other country seeing other forms of violence, but we would know that we do not even know how to name them in their suffering. Literature cannot bring all of those worlds into force, but one novel can stretch our capacity for thinking what’s possible enough to bring one other world within the visible horizon and field of forces in which we know ourselves to live.

Brought forth within a world that already contains a narrative logic, with all the causal structures, fields of comparison, and predicative possibilities that that entails, a fictional character based on Donatha would bring the world that contains her into force in a different way, even if no character by that fictional character’s name had ever existed. Because we use the same habits of understanding characters that we use with real people, we approach characters as having a past and future, a social milieu and quirks, all while remaining aware of their fictionality. We intuit that they possess motivations, which they may or may not understand themselves, and we habitually attribute interpretive agency to them so that in an imagined room full of imagined people, we direct our attention to a field that contains multiple perspectives on the same incident unfolding

simultaneously. The contrast among these multiple perspectives defamiliarizes the novel's world even if the focalizing perspective seems very close to our own.

For comparison with Donatha's story, I want to examine an example of war-time rape from a contemporary work of literature. When Ugwu rapes a girl in Adichie's 2006 novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the scene has been set. It is 1967, Igbo identifying as Biafrans have declared their independence from Nigeria. Ugwu has been kidnapped from the home where he lives with his employers and pressganged into fighting a losing war. He is in his mid-teens and has proven himself a decent soldier by this point in the narrative and earned the respect of other conscripts. "Part of him wanted to be here," we learn (453), but equally he felt "He was not living his life; life was living him" (457). He is drinking homemade gin with the other soldiers after his first successful mission.

He got up to urinate outside and, afterward, leaned against a tree and breathed in the fresh air. It was like sitting in the backyard in Nsukka, looking at the lemon tree and his herb garden... When he finally went back inside, he stopped at the door. The bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulders held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, "Please, please, biko." Her blouse was still on. Between her legs, High-Tech [a younger child soldier] was moving. His thrusts were jerky, his small buttocks darker-colored than his legs. The soldiers were cheering. ...

Ugwu shrugged and moved forward. "Who is afraid?" he said disdainfully. "I just like to eat before others, that is all."

"The food is still fresh!"

"Target Destroyer, aren't you a man?"

The barroom, the fellow soldiers are here for us to imagine as they would appear to Ugwu and the girl. We can think about the feeling of the floor, the facial expressions. Because the story has followed Ugwu from his rural village, to his employment in the university town of Nsukka, through his frivolous exploratory sex life to this moment, we can imagine what he might see as possible or impossible to do in the given situation. The reader enjoys some freedom with regard to the perspective she takes up, but the violence itself stands forth as something beyond all of those perspectives, something whose uninterpretable excess is evoked and preserved by the text. Readers of Adichie's novel know almost as little about this unnamed bar girl as readers of Donatha's testimony know about her. The fact that readers are affiliated with Ugwu during the scene resonates with Heidegger's insight that everyone bears the existential capacity for violence. Still, we are 458 pages into Ugwu's story by the time the scene above occurs. Calculated at an average reading speed of 300 words per minute, we have spent over twelve hours imagining his life and circumstances. Directing and populating our attention for all those hours, *Half of a Yellow Sun* worlds as a work of art. It grants Ugwu's world greater visibility. It problematizes his re-naming according to an act of war and the namelessness of his rape-victim. The novel also renders visible the processes that obscured the visibility of the Nigerian Civil War while it was occurring by featuring a white, British journalist living in Biafra who wants to write the stories of what he is seeing. His stories are not sensational enough for the British and American press, and as his friends and Igbo lover tell him, it is not his story to tell.

In both humanitarian material and literature, the subject experiencing violence appears before a background. On humanitarian website or in mail-outs the figure of the subject may appear in a photograph, a short narrative or a testimonial statement. The individual, perhaps with his or her family, represents the truth of suffering (Fassin 8). The background, which focuses on the facts of political economy and social injustice is presented as naturalized, uninterpreted. The reader is called to witness to the incident after the fact, deeming the victim worthy or unworthy of

assistance. We become responsible perhaps for reparations but not implicated in the situation causing the violence, which is clearly past and finished. In contrast, the reader of a novel stands as a witness to action as it unfolds, even as our own, often safe, surroundings provides a background quite different from that in the fictional world. The fictional background stands forth clearly as interpreted, evoking the already initiated process that we as readers carry forth. It is interpreted by the narrative perspective, and the invitation to interpret the same scene differently, through one of the other characters or in light of violent structures or politics, stands always open. The narrative may draw attention to its own interpretive processes to a greater or lesser degree through layers of conflicting narration such as we see in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (which features three focalizers and a novel within the novel) or through an unreliable narrator, but the reader is invariably reminded of the cultural processes that bring violence to visibility through the layers of narration present in any novel – reader, narrator, implied reader, implied author, etc.

Violence and literature are both strange in Heidegger's use of the term, both excessive and incapable of being fully determined. They both paradoxically bring a world into force by defamiliarizing it. For a reader who has suffered sexual violence, reading about Donatha's or the bar girl's rape may reactivate trauma, the act standing forth in its awe-fulness, but for readers without a personal experience of violence, altering the perception that war and suffering are normal in some parts of the world demands a radical readjustment of norms inadvertently promoted by humanitarian discourse. Before violence can become violent in the sense of surpassing the familiar, familiarity must be established by making the world of a particular violent history visible. Adichie's novel achieves this, affirming more broadly the potential for novels as powerful actors in humanitarian discourse.

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