

Visions of the Not-Yet: Literature and Postcolonial Utopia

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The most vibrant intersection of literature and culture, and literature's most resolute function, may well lie in the generation of hope. The capacity of the imagination to see a different world instils the possibility that the world could be different, and this is the essence of utopian thinking. Of course we are suspicious of utopia because we think of it as blindly optimistic, and optimism has had a bad name since Voltaire's *Candide* in which the annoying Dr Pangloss embodies the foolish belief that everything will turn out well. So Utopia has become the term of panglossian absurdity, the vain optimistic fantasy. But in fact utopianism is not necessarily optimistic, although it is characterised by desire. Utopia is important because it imagines a different kind of future. As Ruth Levitas says, it is the 'desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life' (1995, 257). Hope is the key, for without it there is no road to an alternative way of life. Indeed, for Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, without hope we cannot live.

In the essays collected in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* Bloch asserts the critical importance of art and literature. For him they have a significant utopian function because their *raison d'être* is the imaging of a different world – what he calls their *Vorschein* or “anticipatory illumination”. The anticipatory illumination is the revelation of the “possibilities for rearranging social and political relations to produce *Heimat*: “It is *Heimat* as utopia... that determines the truth content of a work

of art.” (Zipes xxxiii). *Heimat* – the home we have all sensed but never known – becomes the utopian form in postcolonial writing that replaces the promise of nation. In fact we could say that in many respects, its offer of continual possibility, its position ‘nowhere’, its refusal of closure, makes *Heimat* anti-nation. It may lie in the *future* but the promise of *heimat* transforms the present. The imaging of a different world in literature is the most consistent expression of the anticipatory consciousness that characterizes human thinking. This leads Bloch to the very challenging, even startling assertion that aesthetic representation produces an object “more achieved, more thoroughly formed, more essential than the immediate-sensory or immediate-historical occurrence of this Object” (1986, 214).

While the general tenor of utopia is that it is allied to hope, the important feature of utopian thinking is not that it imagines perfection – a eutopia – but that it speaks to the present from a position that exists *nowhere*. As Paul Ricoeur says:

May we not say then that the imagination itself – through the utopian function – has a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? Is not utopia—this leap outside—the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization ‘nowhere’ work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? (16)

The fact that utopia exists ‘nowhere’ is crucial in this function of rethinking, because the fantasy of an alternative society ‘nowhere’ is one of the most formidable contestations of what is (17). Nowhere is the only place from which ideology can be critiqued, because ideology itself is impossible to escape. This position nowhere, and thus potentially outside ideology, is crucial to art and literature.

For Gert Ueding, “Literature is utopia in the very wide sense of course that it is not identical with the reality that faces us as nature and society. It is utopia in the

very precise sense that its connection to this reality is like that of fulfilment to lack...”

(7). But there is another way in which creative acts gesture toward the future. For, as cultural theorist Tony Bennett points out, if ‘production’ is completed only with ‘consumption’ then so far as literary texts are concerned, their production is never completed. They are endlessly *re-produced* endlessly remade with different political consequences and effects (136). But this is surely not only the case for literary works alone. Whenever the creative work is engaged, it is reproduced in the context of another person, place and time. Thus despite Bruno Latour’s assertion, in contrasting the created work with critique, that “It is all about immanence” (181), it is on the contrary, because it is never finished, all about *imminence*. The created work remains alive and constantly on the threshold of a transformed state of being. In this way created works always offer an imminent rearrangement of social and political relations in ways that critique the present.

Perhaps the most telling example of utopian imminence occurs in literature that is manifestly pessimistic, writing that seems to reject hope, and a perfect example is Australian poet Lee Cataldi’s “what lies ahead”

it is not for the poet to have faith
that is for the preacher

it is not for the poet to have hope
that is for the doctor

the poet can only
wring her hands like Cassandra

this is how it will be

my bladder is not real good and then
the man next to me is dead

our children

have vomited they bled they have

wept all over each other
packed into this one remaining cattle truck
on their way to the future

(43)

What is the nowhere from which this poem speaks? How does it frame human possibility? On the face of it we could find no more anti-utopian poem for it rejects both faith and hope as the province of the preacher and the doctor, the poet left “wringing her hands”. Yet the *Vorschein* of this poem lies in its perception of human suffering and the suggested injustices that launch our children “packed into this one remaining cattle truck / on their way to the future.” The poem speaks from a no-place in a way that forces us to “rethink the nature of our social life,” as Ricoeur says. What redeems it from simple despair is the affective response to human suffering and abjection it generates. Affect thus becomes the medium of critique. With critique comes the perception that the world could be different. The poem gestures towards a ‘fulfilment’ contrasted to, and evoked by, this ‘lack’ (Ueding 7). And in that perception of a different world is grounded the very hope that is ostensibly dismissed in the poem. What we recognise in this poem is that hope and critique are necessarily united to produce what Bloch calls ‘concrete utopia.’ The very exposure of the suffering of the world is the anticipatory illumination of a better world.

It is fanciful to think that literature will change the world. But while art and literature will not win wars they can imagine the future. The assumption is that postcolonial literature is committed to resistance. But if resistance is to be more than mere opposition it must have a transformative element. There is a well-worn phrase that encapsulates two avenues of resistance in anti-colonial struggle – “The Book or the Barricade?” – which contrasts the very different effects of literary writing and political conflict. But while the capacity of literature to intervene in the operation of

power might seem limited there is a very deep and important connection between creativity and revolution that lies in its power to imagine future possibility. Despite the surge in various forms of fundamentalist violence and the tragically ill conceived war in Iraq, the early years of this century have been marked by the rise of democratic revolution, conflict inspired by ordinary hope. The insistent struggle for democracy has not resulted in notable success. Whether in the Arab Spring or the Orange revolution in the Ukraine the process appears similar: the people mass in protest, regime-sanctioned thugs fight back but lose their nerve; the world applauds the collapse of the regime and offers to help build a democracy; the lack of democratic institutions leads to a regime as bad as the first, if the country does not get invaded or infiltrated by a more powerful neighbour, as in the Ukraine. This is a sobering narrative, many Springs turn to Winters, as we have witnessed in Egypt, but the good news is that the revolution continues.

In his inaugural lecture in Tübingen in 1961 entitled “Can Hope be Disappointed?” Ernst Bloch’s answer was that even a well-founded hope can be disappointed: otherwise it would not be hope. In fact hope never guarantees anything. It can only be daring and must point to possibilities that will in part depend on chance for their fulfilment. Hope can be frustrated and thwarted, but out of that frustration and disappointment it can learn to estimate the opposition. Hope can learn through damaging experiences, but it can never be driven off course. ‘Revolution’ has two meanings: it is not simply a revolt but a revolving, a spiral into the future. Seeing this, we can understand that the belief in the future does not stop with revolution: it remains part of the continuous spiraling of hope. Even if democracy comes, and hope, at least for some, has still been disappointed, creative work continues to spiral into the

future, continues the revolution. That movement into the future must first be a movement of the imagination. As Mahmoud Darwish says in 'State of Siege'

Here, on the slopes facing the sunset
And the cannon-mouth of time',
Near orchards stripped of their shadows,
We do what prisoners do;
We do what the unemployed do
We cultivate hope. (Darwish np)

The creative cultural product is unmatched in its ability to cultivate hope because creativity itself is the act of 'stepping beyond.' As Salman Rushdie puts it: "this is how newness enters the world" (395).

Tanzanian Sam Raiti Mtamba frames the power of literature somewhat hyperbolically in his story "The Pound of Flesh"

... only art and literature could unlock the mysteries of life. Before men of letters there was nothing either cabalistic or magical. It was the open sesame, the sea into which everything flowed, the sea from which everything had its source and succour. (167)

This is the euphoric outpouring of a man who wants to be a writer. Nigerian Chris Abani puts it more temperately in a talk on the stories of Africa

What we know about how to be who we are comes from stories. It comes from the novels, the movies, the fashion magazines. It comes from popular culture. In other words it's the agents of our imagination who really shape who we are. (*Stories*)

These are fascinating examples of the concurrence of African writers with Bloch's conviction of the utopian function of art and literature.

We might say that not only does imagination shape who we are, as Chris Abani says, but the imagination helps us rethink the meaning of culture, civilization, history, identity. Ricoeur would see the imagination functioning beyond the aesthetic but one of the key dimensions of the imaginative achievement, and thus the vision of

possibility offered by art and literature, is the power of *affect* and its connection with hope. Take these lines from Ghanaian poet Kofi Anyidoho's *The Harvest of Dreams*

Though our memory of life now boils
Into vapours, the old melody of hope
Still clings to the tenderness of hearts
Locked in caves of stubborn minds

The children will be home
The children will be home
The children
Those children will
Be home
Some Day (*Harvest* 48)

The melody of fulfilment by which the lines conceive *Heimat* explains the powerful and dynamic nature of hope that re-emerges in the work of so many postcolonial poets and novelists. Poetry offers a particularly apt demonstration of the power of *affect* produced through the sound and rhythm of the lines in providing the reassurance of hope. When read on the page and when read aloud, these lines, culminating in the resonant phrase "Some day" confirms that the horizon of the future constantly beckons.

As well as art and literature, of course, one of the most powerful mediums for envisaging possibility in postcolonial cultures has been film. As Bekolo Obama explains, Sembéne Ousmane used film to open up new perspectives with the slogan: "Decolonize the screen. Thinking is speculating with images" (48). Cinema had a heuristic function for him, as "a comparative study between the existing, or real, and the possible" (48). Clearly cinema was seen to conceive the possible through the power of visual images. In the imaginative space that emerges in this way, African viewers could project themselves into a future that they themselves invented (46).

Can we extend the power of the imagination to the cultural properties of literature? Do art and literature transcend their cultural provenance? This is an important question for postcolonial writing, which is concerned, among other things, with manifesting cultural *difference*. But universalist though Bloch's concept of utopia may be, neither the cultural nor political qualities of writing inhibit their capacity to transcend class or culture to point to the future. The question is rather one of the capacities of the reader, viewer or listener to discern the ways and extent to which art and literature transcend their origin.

Bloch extends the capacity of the creative spirit to all forms of artistic endeavour, and indeed, for him every great aesthetic statement embodies a spirit of utopia: "in Strasbourg cathedral and in the Divine Comedy, in the expectant music of Beethoven and in the latencies of the Mass in B Minor... (1986, 158) Art and literature are in fact the key to the paradoxical presence of a utopian element in its apparent opposite – ideology. While he agrees with Marx that "Ideologies as the ruling ideas of an age, are... the ideas of the ruling class" (1986, 150), he insisted that ideologies also incorporate the image of a world beyond alienation and that without the utopian function operating even within ideology, no spiritual surplus, no idea of a better world would be possible. For Bloch it is creative effort that both carries and resolves this paradox. The perception of the utopian element in ideology is precisely the thing that sets Bloch apart from Marx, and Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricoeur go on to elaborate this relation between what we might consider to be opposites. Bloch points out that ideology would be unable to carry out its most important function, 'namely premature harmonization of social contradictions', if consisted only of deception and false consciousness (Ricoeur 90).

Whatever a literature's politics, the capacity to dream, and the possible worlds that are dreamt are obstinately impervious to political control. While ideology displays a utopian element, the power of the literary work lies in its capacity to speak from outside ideology, from Nowhere, as Ricoeur says. This is a point at which the imagination separates itself from agendas of political commitment. As Caryl Phillips puts it, whatever the commitment or the politics of the writer his or her first commitment is to "write well".¹ Writing well means more than writing fluently, elegantly, or convincingly: it means writing in a way that realizes the full potential of the imagination. This is what launches the anticipatory consciousness of art and literature beyond the ideological environment of its production. "Literature as utopia is generally encroachment of the power of the imagination on new realities of experience" (Ueding 7) While the postcolonial writer embraces an ideology of resistance, the *Vorschein* of the literary work obtains its power by critiquing the present from the imagined 'Unbecome' of the future.

History, Memory and the Future

The significance of postcolonial images of the future is that they are invariably embedded in a past in a way that transforms the present. This is what Edouard Glissant calls a "prophetic vision of the past," (64) which implies the possibility of an ahistorical past. Africa is a particularly rich site for the capacity of literature to contest the dominance of the master discourse of History. Hegel's notorious abolition of Africa from History is well known, but he is not alone in this: Karl Marx thought Asiatic and African societies to be ahistorical, as well as Slavic countries, Latin Europe, and the whole of South America. The consequence of this is that Africa, like the rest of the world, wants to enter history, because, as Ashish Nandy puts it

¹ Talk at EACLALS Conference, Venice, March 29th 2008.

“Historical consciousness now owns the globe... Though millions of people continue to stay outside history, millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects” (46). When colonial societies are historicized they are brought into history, brought into the discourse of modernity as a function of imperial control – mapped, named, organized, legislated, inscribed. But at the same time they are kept at History’s margins. The consequence of this is the implantation of both loss and desire. Being inscribed into history is to be made modern because history and European modernity go hand in hand. As Dipesh Chakrabarty says:

So long as one operates within the discourse of 'history' at the institutional site of the university it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between 'history' and the modernizing narratives of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state. (19)

So the nation conspires with the imperial discourse of history in conferring the holy grail of modern being on postcolonial subjects. Nigerian Ben Okri’s chapter “The Battle of Rewritten Histories” in *Infinite Riches* depicts the struggle involved in the writing of African history when the Governor General, clearly a symbol of the entire institution of imperial knowledge-making, puts pen to paper:

He rewrote the space in which I slept. He rewrote the long silences of the country which were really passionate dreams. He rewrote the seas and wind, the atmospheric conditions and the humidity. He rewrote the seasons and made them limited and unlyrical. He reinvented the geography of the nation and the whole continent. He redrew the continent’s size on the world map, made it smaller, made it odder. (110-11)

In his rewriting the Governor General wiped out Africa's ancient civilizations, its religion, spiritual dimension, its art and music, and in so changing the past "he altered our present."

We see why literature is so important: Utopia becomes necessary because it is the only place from which the ideology of History can be contested, and the present regained. The vision of African futures then begins in a reformulation of African pasts, and there is no better place to reaffirm a past beyond History, than literature. This has been the way in which postcolonial writers have represented the past: having been driven to the margins of History, postcolonial history is habitually written through literature, by means of memory and the imagination. In Kofi Anyidoho's poetic rendition of the history of colonialism, "Gods of the Pathways," he observes that Africa stands at the crossroads at which the ahistorical past can become the new ground for a vision of the future.

We are standing at The CrossRoads
Stranded so long Stranded
at the meeting point
of NightMare and DawnDream
Leaning against Storms
Watching horizons filled with ThunderBolts ...

But there are those among us
who still recall the gone years
and speak of ancient joys long buried
beneath a topsoil of bad memories. ("Return" 140)

The message is that the topsoil of bad memories can be swept away, that the DawnDream can be realized.

In celebrated Ghanaian novelist Kojo Laing's *Search Sweet Country* ½, Allotey offers some sage advice to Professor Sackey,

We sat down and let the change, the history be thrown at us.
And in spite of over five hundred years of association with
foreigners, we have been very stubborn: we have kept our
basic rhythms; we know our languages and have assimilated
so much into them. ... Do you really think our traditional
ways were so weak that they could have been so easily swept
aside? They were too strong. (102-3)

This is a resounding statement of the resilience of the ahistorical past, the power of myth to resist History, the centrality of memory in the maintenance of culture. In Anyidoho's "Gathering the Harvest Dance" he suggests that the future can only be realised by staring History in the face

We come today to Stare our History in the Face
We come today to Shake Hands with our Deepest Fear
We come today to exchange our Shame for Hope
Our DeepSilence for Ancestral Harvest Songs ("Return" 142)

Memory and the Future

The valuing of the mythic past in the postcolonial imagination is not only an attempt to disrupt the dominance of European history, but also an attempt to re-conceive a place in the present, a place transformed by the infusion of this past. Postcolonial utopianism is grounded in a continual process, a difficult and even paradoxical process of emancipation without teleology, a cyclic 'return' to the future. The present is the crucial site of the continual motion by which the New comes into being. In such transformative conceptions of utopian hope the "Not-Yet" is always a possibility emerging from the past. In traditional post-colonial societies the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past.

Whereas for Ernst Bloch the utopian drive, the ‘anticipatory consciousness’ is a universal feature of human life, the utopianism of much postcolonial literature is cyclic and recuperative. A key feature of the utopian in African literature is the intersection of the anticipatory consciousness with cultural memory, transforming the African *imaginaire* through a vision of the future grounded in a memory of the past. As Gambian poet Tijan Sallah writes:

For stems must have roots
Dreams must seek tenacity
In lumps of savage earth.
For skies without pillars
Crumble like ancient roofs.
Skies without pillars
Crash to the dust of earth

It is in the roots that the future is planted.

We should open the shutters of the mind
To those hidden spaces of Dusty Kingdoms
For memory is roots; dreams are branches. (9)

There can be no more powerful statement of the location of the future in memory – our “Dreams must seek tenacity / In lumps of savage earth.” Memory is not about recovering a past but about the production of possibility – memory is a recreation, not a looking backwards, but a reaching out to a horizon, somewhere ‘out there’.

Memory has a complex relationship with time. Technically, the present does not actually exist, at least not in stasis, but is *always* a process of the future becoming past, becoming memory. To remember does not bring the past into the present, but the act of remembering or the invocation of memory transforms the fluid present. Memory refers to a past “that has never been present” not only because the present is a continual flow, but because memory invokes a past that must be *projected* so to

speak, into the future, not only the future of its recalling, but the future of the realm of possibility itself. This process deploys a radically transformed sense of the relation between memory and the future:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, re-figuring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (Bhabha 10)

This suggests that a proper understanding of the capacity of the creative spirit to anticipate the future requires a re-thinking of the nature of time itself. We think of time as either flowing or enduring and the dismantling of this apparent dichotomy between succession and duration is important for utopian theory. The characteristic of Modernity with its concept of chronological 'empty' time, dislocated from place or human life is a sense of the separation of past, present and future. Although the present may be seen as a continuous stream of prospections becoming retrospections, the sense that the past has gone and the future is coming separates what may be called the three phases of time.

Friedrich Kummel proposes that the apparent conflict between time as succession and time as duration in philosophy comes about because we forget that time has no reality apart from the medium of human experience and thought (31). "No single and final definition of time is possible... since such a concept is always conditioned by one's understanding of it." (31) As Mahmoud Darwish says "Time is a river / blurred by the tears we gaze through" ("State").

While we think of time as either flowing or enduring, Kummel makes the point that duration without succession would lose all temporal characteristics. A theory of time therefore must understand the correlation of these two principles. Duration arises only from the stream of time and only within the background of duration is our awareness of succession possible. The critical consequence of this is that

If something is to abide, endure, then its past may never be simply 'past,' but must in some way also remain "present;" by the same token its future must already somehow be contained in its present. Duration is said to exist only when the "three times" (put in quotation marks when used in the sense of past, present and future) not only follow one another but are all at the same time conjointly present... the coexistence of the "times" means that a past time does not simply pass away to give way to a present time, but rather than both as *different* times may exist conjointly, even if not simultaneously. (35-36)

Now what interests me about this is that such an experience of time is already present in postcolonial literatures. This is particularly so in the novel, the crucial characteristic of which is its engagement with time. Stories offer the progress of a world in time and thus can become narratives of temporal order. But magically, by unfolding in time they take us out of time. It may be that narrative, whose materiality is isomorphic with temporality, provides a way (though not the only way) of communicating different experiences of time. One way of communicating a different knowledge of time is through 'circular time' developed from the forms of oral story telling, in which 'then' and 'now' are in constant dialogue.

We can see this layered time throughout African literature, from the scene of the egwugwu in *Things Fall Apart*, who are the actual mythic ancestors of the village

and at the same time the recognisable elders dressed up to dance. The layering of time continues to the present in a passage from Kojo Laing's *Search Sweet Country* when Kofi Loww stands in the market:

He stood still caught in perfect African time – time that existed in any dimension – and blocking the paths of other sellers with the same time that brought ancestors to the market, that touched the eyes of sellers and buyers now, that moved beyond those yet to be born. (156)

In a fascinating poem Anyidoho links the circular African time to the rhythm of the drums, which lead in a backwards-forwards dance. Ultimately the rhythm of the dance is the rhythm of time itself. Africa is centred in a union of time and sound and silence, a circular time in which the future and past are lodged in and energize the present.

And The Drums
The Drums guide our Feet
In this backwards-forwards Dance
This Husago Dance
This Dance into a Future
That ends in the Past.

Two steps Forward
to where Hope
rises like RainBows.
One step Backward
to where Sorrow
falls like Tropical ThunderStorms.

And Africa
Africa leans against the Storms
Leaning against the Future

Like a Warrior

Tired from History's BattleFields. ("Return" 134)

The poet goes on to invite us to come with him across the Birth of Time in a union of sound and silence. The rhythm of the drums becomes a powerful image of layered time, because drums in Anyidoho have the powerful role of enfolding, collapsing time. In his poem "The Return" he takes on the persona of the Creator who made a new world filled with gods and goddesses who "soiled their glory / with passions unfit for dogs." So he made a newer world peopled with HumanBeings. The poem ends with the lines:

Call back here those Old Drummers

Give them back those broken drums with nasal twangs

Let them put New Rhythms to the Loom

And weave New tapestries for your Gliding Feet

The Birth of a New World demands the Graceful Dance of Life

Now there is still some Laughter in your Souls

Your feet with skill must teach your Hearts

To weave the Graceful Dance of Life

The Ancestral Primordial Dance of Birth.(136)

So the dance of life which is beaten by the drums is the birth of a new world. Anyidoho further develops this interpenetration of past present and future in the images of the "rope" or "creeper" or "birth cord" which symbolize time, the different generations bound together by the creeper rather than separated by the line of history. The ancestors are like the seed that gives birth to the creeper linking together the past and present members of the clan (10); the weaving of a rope represents tradition. In a wider sense, the rope or creeper is the image of life itself and in particular of man's regenerative faculties: the weaving of the rope is also a reminder of the importance of

procreation, the foremost duty of every man (12). And the procreation of children is linked, in the Ewe vocabulary, to the creation of poetry and music. In his paper on Ewe funeral poetry Anyidoho says:

All the activities generated by death, all the rites, the ceremonies, the funeral dance and song, may be seen as properly motivated by one overriding desire - the desire to, perpetuate life in spite of and because of death [...]. The dead continue to live not just in spirit but also in the artistic tradition [...]. The ultimate reality that rules the universe [...] is life's permanence in various transformations even beyond death (1984, 21-2).

Here we find a powerful statement of the cultural underpinning of African hope and the location of the future in the present.

The origin of postcolonial utopianism lies in the resilience of memory, particularly of the “ancient joys buried deep beneath the topsoil of bad memories.” It does this because memory refuses to recognise the distinction between duration and succession. But African utopianism found its most powerful expression in the persistence of hope for freedom from colonial oppression. In most cases the vision was for an independent state, which led to great disillusionment as the post-independence nation simply moved in to occupy the structures of the colonial state. But the dynamic of hope generated by anti-colonial writers produced the energy for future thinking throughout the subsequent bitter realisation of post-independence failure.

One of the most powerful voices of hope in the pre-independence period was that of Aghostino Neto whose cry against the repressive Portuguese regime of Angola stands as a benchmark for the persistence of hope for freedom, and the clarity of a vision for the future. Neto’s road to the future passes through prison, exile, torture,

and the death of close friends, but it is sustained by the certainty of hope. His collection *Sacred Hope* lodges the cry for freedom in something much deeper than the nation state. This I think is the source of the power of this poetry, because the cry of freedom expresses the dynamic of hope that continues to project into the future. This is a salutary reminder that despite the disappointments of subsequent national regimes in Africa, the vision of *heimat* still persists and the dynamic of hope is one that continues to drive its creative writers. Neto can say on behalf of all African writers: “I am a day in a dark night / I am an expression of yearning” (viii).

Some of the energy for this sense of irrepressible hope comes from the poet’s task of speaking on behalf of other oppressed people in the colony. This is not so much the voice of the seer as the voice of one who knows that his sufferings and hopes are shared. For Neto hope is not a vague wish but something grounded in action, a sense of the future grounded in the present.

Tomorrow we shall sing anthems to freedom
When we commemorate
The day of the abolition of this slavery

We are going in search of light
Your children Mother
(all black mothers
whose sons have gone)
They go in search of life (1-2)

The words of Neto’s translator are apposite here: “the pressing need is not to preserve elements of the past which are being shattered by the present, but to release the future imprisoned in the present” (xxxviii). In the poem *Saturday Night in the Muceques*

(the poor districts of Luanda where Africans live) after listing the forms of anxiety oppressing the people he says:

In men
Seethes the desire to make the supreme effort
So that Man
May be reborn in each man
And hope
No longer becomes
The lamentation of the crowd. (1974, 9)

In the poem “bleeding and germinating” we find that out of blood and suffering germinates hope, peace and love:

Our eyes, blood and life
Turned to hands waving love in all the world
Hands in the future – smile inspirers of faith in
The vitality
Of Africa earth Africa human
Of immense Africa
Germinating under the soil of hope
Creating fraternal ties in freedom of desire
Of anxiety for concord
Bleeding and germinating

For the future here are our eyes
For Peace here are our voices
For Peace her are our hands

Of Africa united in love. (43)

It is possibly only in the context of Neto’s history of imprisonment and torture that the euphoria of this rhetoric can be understood. This combination of the sacred, and love,

and the ahistorical reality of Africa recurs in Chris Abani's devastating novel about child soldiers, *Song for Night* when My Luck, the fifteen-year old child soldier, discovers a mysterious lake and asks its equally mysterious guardian:

And this lake is real?... I don't understand

"Nobody does. Everybody does. It is real because it is a tall tale. This lake is the heart of our people. This lake is love. If you find it, and find the pillar, you can climb it into the very heart of God," he said. (2007, 69)

Like Neto, Abani was imprisoned, tortured and exiled but the lake provides a vision of Africa that perhaps only literature – and its various tall tales – can provide. Nevertheless such magical real images may, as Ricoeur says, have a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life. Although the persistence of hope is modelled in Neto we find it throughout African literature as a dynamic and necessary foundation for the vision of the future. As Ghana's most famous poet Kofi Awoonor says in "A Death Foretold":

I believe in hope and the future
of hope, in victory before death
collective inexorable, obligatory;...

I believe in men and the gods
in the spirit and the substance,
in death and the reawakening
in the promised festival and denial
in our heroes and the nation
in the wisdom of the people
the certainty of victory
the validity of struggle. (445)

The spiral of hope unites imagination and belief.

The trajectory of African hope and its vision of the future came increasingly to look outward towards a “concrete utopia”. What literature sees is a possible future within the real; and while it may be anticipated as a subjective experience, it also has objective status” (Levitas, 1990: 89). Or as Neto puts it, “He who has strived has not lost / But has not yet won” (12). Postcolonial visions of the future, then, are driven by the dynamic of hope, which took shape in the experience of colonization, but continues through an anticipatory consciousness that is grounded in ahistorical memory. They emerge out of an empowering experience of layered time that envisages an impact on the world. Utopia is necessary because it is only from the No-Place of a utopian future that ideology, particularly the teleological ideology of History can be contested. What remains remarkable about African literature and cultural production is the stunning tenacity of its hope and its grounded vision of possibility.

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