Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature
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Abstract: This paper examines the construction of national commitment in third generation African literature through a comparative reading of Binyavanga Wainaina's literary memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance,* and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*. In each text, the relationship between the individual and his or her nation of origin does not function in singular terms, reflecting the multiply-articulated imagined communities in which individual lives exist and the (re)doubled workings of filiation, affiliation, and disavowal at play in contemporary Africa. Like the nations that comprise the continent, then, the idea of the nation in the contemporary African literary work is both variable and shifting, responding to its immediate circumstances and demonstrating the potency of novel paradigms of belonging. Nationalism, like the nation, thus reflects a deep ambivalence that mobilizes multiple affiliations and, nevertheless, does not preclude belonging and commitment. Rather than dismissing the nation, Wainaina's, Vera's, and Nwaubani's works present a new vision of nationhood and national belonging.

Keywords: African literature, nationalism, contemporary literature, third generation

According to recent scholarship, the characteristics of third generation African literature, published by writers from Africa and the African diaspora from the 1990s to the present day, include an emphasis on

diasporic identity, migration, transnationality, globalization, and a diminished concern with the colonial past. As Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton write, the works categorized as third generation, authored by "emergent writers who had acquired a creative identity markedly different" from their predecessors' ("Nigeria's Third Generation" 7), mark a renaissance of sorts for the African novel in English, following a period of relative paucity in literary production in the 1980s. While Adesanmi and Dunton focus largely on the particularly high-profile writing from Nigeria, their comments nonetheless point towards a larger trend in contemporary studies of African literature. Elsewhere, for instance, Adesanmi, borrowing Abdoutahman Ali Waberi's phrase, writes that the third generation of Francophone African writers, as the "children of the postcolony," author a distinct body of work marked by its preoccupation with themes of "identity and otherness as conditioned by their location in the diasporic and/or exilic space" ("Postcolonial Entanglement" 236). This preoccupation with the diasporic and exilic is echoed in Tanure Ojaide's observation that "[m]igration, globalization, and the related phenomena of exile, transnationality, and multilocality" in the literary output of the third generation of African writers has "generat[ed] diverse perspectives on the evolving nature of African literature and the depiction of the contemporary African condition" ("Migration" 43, 46). Pertinently, the characterization of third generation African writers has lingered on their position as "temporally severed from the colonial event" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation" 14) and therefore portrays them as shaped more distinctly by contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism, globalization, nomadism, and liminality than their predecessors. Positioned in this postmodern milieu, third generation writers have been heralded for their questioning of over-determined identity markers and their deconstruction of "totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation" 15), mirroring a larger global tendency in the postcolonial and African novel to embrace what has been called the "migration of memory" and "traveling identities" (Nwakanma 13) over a singular application of what Chidi Amuta once referred to as "the national imperative" (86) of post-independence writing.

First and second generation African literature has been largely characterized by its commitment to decolonization, independence, and the nation-state (Ojaide, "Modern African Literature"; Ojaide, "Examining Canonisation"; Okuyade). This vision of nationalism through a literary anti-colonial commitment has been seen as a byproduct of the necessity, for the writer in the era of independence, to "appropriate the national form as well as use it in decolonization efforts . . . in opposition to British rule" (Adams 291), exploiting what Benedict Anderson has referred to as "the way in which, quite unconsciously, the nineteenth-century colonial state (and policies that its mindset encouraged) dialectically engendered the grammar of the nationalisms that eventually arose to combat it" (xiv). Whereas these earlier writers have been viewed as embracing the imagined community of the constructed colonial nation-state as a means of resistance, authors of third generation literature, temporally and spatially displaced from the event of colonization and the turmoil of independence, have been described as reflecting a more varied engagement with the nation (Hawley; Adesanmi and Dunton, "Everything Good"; Ojaide, "Examining Canonisation" 16-17; Adéèkó). While acknowledging the extent to which third generation writing has moved away from the "vibrant nationalist aspirations that motivated the best known of African Anglophone writing" from 1945 to 1980 (Adéèkó 11), scholarship has nonetheless viewed third generation writing as exhibiting a perspective in which the individual is no longer tied singularly to the nation, able to act from a complex and multiply-rooted subjective position without the "odium of betrayal" tainting his or her actions (Adéèkó 12). It is certainly true that the relationship between the individual and the nation has evolved over time; however, the expansion of national commitment from a singular mode of affiliation to a site of plural belonging does not necessitate the wholesale disavowal of the nation as a site of belonging and negotiation. Instead, the relationship between the individual and the nation creates the space in which a plurality of national belongings and becomings may co-exist, complicating the presentation of the nation and its imagined community as well as the very divisiveness of categories of self and nation. In this paper, I will explore the plural space of national commitment, extending contem-

porary scholarship on third generation African literature and drawing on readings of Binyavanga Wainaina's literary memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*. As examples of third generation writing, these three texts draw upon diverse models of the individual/nation relationship, demonstrating the range of affiliations, disavowals, and commitments that, taken together, mark the dynamic and multivocal space of the nation as a community articulated not in spite of but because of its differences. Rather than marking a break with the narratives of previous generations, then, these three works reflect the ongoing evolution of national commitment in African literatures.

The Nation, Nationalism, and the African Context

The early centrality of nationalism in African literature is tied inextricably to the emergence of the independent nation-state on the African continent. The moment of independence from colonial rule resounds throughout the writing of first and second generation African literature as the central fulcrum around which national commitment revolves. As a moment that "heralded the end of colonialism and confirmed the great victory of the national movement for liberation" (Lazarus, "Great Expectations" 49), the coming into being of the African nation-state marked a watershed event in the trajectory of African literature (Lazarus, "Great Expectations" 51). As the promise of independence waned, subject to the tensions inherited from colonial powers and the hijacking by a bourgeois elite (Zeleza, "Democratic Transition" 479; Lazarus, "Great Expectations" 55-56; Taoua 197), the nation was seen as unable to "evolve stable political structures that are imbued with a sense of national commitment and notions of social justice, around which the loyalties of the masses could be mobilized" (Ajayi qtd. in Lazarus, "Great Expectations" 51). Against this backdrop, the literature of anti-colonial resistance transformed into a "literature of disillusionment" in the decades that followed (Lazarus, "Great Expectations" 52). The continent, under this line of criticism, became "caught between the birth of her modern nationalism and the quest for nationhood" (Mazrui 23), where the seemingly opposed values of "anti-colonial national revival"

and "postcolonial national disillusionment" (Etsy 22) conflicted, resulting in a literature that resisted the top-down authoritarian nationalism of the ruling class in favor of rebellion. In its more recent forms, this alienation from the nation, itself a mode of nationalism (Miller 95), has been replaced by the "transnational value" structures of postcolonialism (Mishra and Hodges 377) realized through "the hybrid, mobile subject of diaspora" (Mishra and Hodges 383) and the "naturally cosmopolitan form" of the "Third World" novel (Brennan 56). Contemporary African writers have produced a literature perceived by critics as individualistic, hybrid, postmodern, and beyond the fossilized vestiges of constructs such as the nation-state in a newly globalized realm of perpetual liminality.

Yet the critical notion that the third generation of African literature has escaped a concern with the nation appears to be based on the very definition of nationalism in use in these critical discussions. Nationalism, as defined in readings of African literature, emerges as "the expression of a radically changed form of consciousness" (Anderson xiv), taking its roots in late eighteenth century Europe (Anderson 4). Emerging in its modern form during the age of the Enlightenment, the contemporary nation "is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Anderson 7). Nationalism, framed as such, finds its definition through a singular, shared, and overriding commitment to the nation felt by all and superseding all other affiliations. This commitment, spread across the territory of the nation-state to bind together the imagined community of the nation through its homogenous solidarity, is thus durable against temptations towards disavowal. Yet, the very form of the African nation is one that resists reduction to Renan's romanticized vision of the nation as a unified "soul, a spiritual principle" (Renan 19). As Christopher Miller notes, African nationalism "begins as a nationalism without a nation" (74), operating not at the horizontal level described by Anderson but rather "top-down" (Thomas 2) through practices of exhortation (Court and Prewitt 110). This nationalism is thus one that functions along the vertical axis, con-

figured through the machinations of colonialism and solidified through the transferal of official nationalism to an anti-colonial elite. Originating in the form of anti-colonial resistance, national commitment in Africa has always coincided with myriad other affiliations and has taken shape as much in a critique of the nation-state as in a celebration of it. Thus, having moved from "prenationalism to postnationalism (or 'proton-ationalism') without an assertion of experience of 'positive,' 'traditional' nationalism" (Miller 65), the notion of national commitment in Africa is multi-layered, diverse, and ever-shifting, marked by tensions between the vertical imperatives of governmental nationalism and the horizontal cacophony of diverse and irreducible lived experience. While Miller's comments lead towards a cultural relativistic and anthropological out-look on African national becoming that I will not adopt in this paper, his criticism of the handling of nation and nationalism in scholarship none-theless captures a crucial point: through an overreliance on frameworks that regard the nation as a unified entity, discussions of the appearance of the nation in African literatures have inadvertently redrawn the rigid categories of "civic" and "ethnic" nationalisms, resulting in a Manichean view of postcolonial Africa (Barrington 11-12). Yet, as "states looking for nations" (Appiah 162), defined by artificial boundaries imposed by the colonizing powers, African nation-states cannot be marked in such simple terms. Given the crucial importance of "the question of how to think *differently* about nationalism—above all in the ongoing context of anti-imperialist struggle" (Lazarus, "Disavowing" 70; emphasis in origi-nal), it is precisely the circulation of shifting, occluding, deferred, and transposed affiliations and disavowals that gives voice to national com-mitment, creating space for the plurality of difference within the shifting space of the nation. Through a critical perspective that recuperates the nation in the divergent forms through which it appears in contempo-rary African literature, readings of third generation African writing may better grasp the complexity through which identities and collectivities are negotiated in this body of writing. Thus, rather than dismissing the nation outright, third generation literature might reveal in a more atten-tive reading the myriad, discrepant manifestations of national affiliation through which a contemporary African subjectivities are formed.

Kimay and the Plurality of Postcolonial Kenyan Becoming

The nation as a construct is central to Binyavanga Wainaina's literary memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. Throughout its narrative, the lyrical memoir sweeps across decades, states, and continents to construct a vision of Kenya in which the nation unfurls in a complex and often-contradictory network of affiliations and disavowals, sites of engagement and disillusionment. Reflecting the ambiguity of its title, the narrative problematizes the idea of the nation as a singular and all-encompassing site, intertwining imagined spaces and physical landscapes ranging from Rwanda to Uganda to South Africa to the United States, ultimately creating a portrait of post-independence Kenya that highlights plurality and dislocates the totalizing mythologies of the nation-state. Throughout the memoir, it is precisely through the shifting and often simultaneous deployment of belonging and alienation that commitment to the nation displays itself; without the contradictory, complementary, and contrarian play of multiple levels of idealization and renunciation that resound across the narrative, the nation would cease to exist.

Early in the narrative, the nation emerges from an amalgamation of overlapping imagined spaces, affiliations, and disavowals of those connections that prevent an unfettered version of the self. The novel's simultaneous recourse to engagement and disillusion, while paradoxical, becomes that which allows the shifting space of commitment to emerge. Disavowal here is not incompatible with a larger sense of belonging but rather creates the gaps and fissures in which moments of connection flicker to life. In the narrative's opening passages, the productive tension between disavowal and connectivity develops through the young Binyavanga's sense of permanent unsettlement and perpetual displacement, setting him apart from those around him:

> It is afternoon. We are playing soccer near the clothesline behind the main house. Jimmy, my brother, is eleven, and my sister, Ciru, is five and a half. I am the goalie.
>
> I am seven years old, and I still do not know why everybody seems to know what they are doing and why they are doing it. (Wainaina 3)

The narrator's lack of comprehension of the whys and hows of existence is only overcome through his closeness with his brother and sister: "I know how to move with her patterns, and to move with Jimmy's patterns. My patterns are always tripping on each other in public. They are only safe when I am alone, or when I am daydreaming" (4). Finding his "patterns" incompatible with public life, the child narrator holds on to the family surrounding him, locating in his familiarity with their rhythms a code through which to navigate his outer experience. The pulses of the narrator's inner existence continue only in private, incompatible but somehow coexisting with the public patterns he observes, articulating the lived experience of childhood across multiple registers. This private drama of conflicting and simultaneous rhythms is amplified through the larger dissonance of the Kenyan community, expressed through the music of daily life: "Random sounds fall into my ears: cars, birds, black mamba bicycle bells, distant children, dogs, crows, and afternoon national radio music. Congo rumba. People outside our compound are talking, in languages I know the sounds of, but do not understand or speak, Luhya, Gikuyu" (3). Like the patterns of his life that do not fit together, so pulse the incongruous idioms of the nation. What he will explain in adulthood as "an aspect of Kenya I am always acutely aware of—and crave, because I don't have it all" (125), the child narrator can only perceive as a multitude of codes, rhythms, and discourses clashing with and undergirding each other, which he may recognize but will never decipher. From an early stage, the nation is defined through its horizontal sprawling, characterized by the pulsations and movements of dissonant tongues rather than by homogeneity or comradeship. The multiple languages of the national space thus intertwine, coexist, and mask one another, creating a dense and variable fabric. Anderson suggests that "the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*" (Anderson 133; emphasis in original), which nonetheless need not function as "an instrument of exclusion" (Anderson 134). Yet language, for the young Binyavanga, does not operate in a simple binary of inclusion and exclusion. Instead, language and linguistic solidarities overlap and transpose upon one another, creating conflict at the same time

that they create a shared space that remains irreducible to a defined particularity.

Concurrent with the movements of these contrapuntal codes, however, the young Binyavanga is inculcated into a top-down form of nationalism, one engineered by a post-colonial elite with an interest in the mythification of unified origins through "the concept of 'Harambee', with its emphasis on community and national 'togetherness', and the figure of the president himself" (Court and Prewitt 110), remaining a space defined by erasure and an immutable notion of boundaries in identity (Wainaina 210-11). Unlike the irreducible, if opaque, collectivity of affiliations that the narrator feels in his lived experience of the nation, the voracious nationalism of the government imposed upon him operates in staccato, estranged from the pulsations of the nation:

> Kenyatta is the father of our nation. I wonder whether Kenya was named after Kenyatta, or Kenyatta was named after Kenya.
> Television people say Keenya. We say Ke-nya. Kenya is fifteen years old. It is even older than Jimmy.
> Kenya is not Uganda. (Wainaina 14)

Throughout the narrative, the contrast between the unknown and the unknowable, accepted by the narrator, and the rigid and normative, enforced by the government, unfurls to foreground the tension fabricated between the vertical and the horizontal, exemplified in what the narrator calls *kimay*. For the narrator, Kenya is *kimay*, a word he uses to describe

> yodelling Gikuyu women, Scottish square dancing to the accordion-playing man who wears a hat with a feather. It is a neon man called Jimmy, who has a screaming guitar and a giant Afro. It is ululating Gikuyu women crying around Kenyatta's body on television. Gurgling Maasai men jumping up and down. Luo men in feathers and Kenyatta beards, nyatittying. Congo men singing like women. (25)

The nation emerges from the myriad discourses, voices, and codes that constitute it as multiply-articulated and contingent. Yet for the government, Kenya is something essential, immutable, and written in a single

narrative of triumph. The nation in this official form is an engineered and inseparable manifestation of the state. The nationalism of the government, the nationalism of Kenyatta, Moi, the Gikuyu, the Luo, and the Kalenjin thus become a nationalism of artifice and betrayal. It is a nationalism that, imported with colonialism, cannot capture the essence of the nation nor the complex texture of national commitment dispersively felt from the ground up. It is a nationalism that tries to enforce the unenforceable in its policies, holding on to "the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the *Volk*" (Bhabha 1): "English is Kenya's official language. All documents that are legal and official must be in English. Kiswahili is not compulsory in school; it is our national language. . . . Our constitution does not name our other languages. I think it is because we want to eradicate tribalism. We are not allowed to speak 'mother tongue' in school" (Wainaina 34). It is a nationalism that cannot find space for *kimay*, what the young narrator perceives as "any language [he] cannot speak, but [he hears] every day" (25), and that exposes the artificiality of "identity against difference, inside against outside, and . . . the assumed superiority of inside over outside" (Bennington 132).

As the narrator ages, he becomes more astutely aware of the disjuncture between his lived experience and the fabricated categories of state-sanctioned nationalism; with this increasing tension apparent, the multiplicity of lived experience in contemporary Kenya heightens. Repeatedly, the narrator laments his inability to understand Gikuyu, the language of his father. Concurrently, the specter of Idi Amin and Uganda, the nation of his mother's birth and girlhood, loom large in his imagination, becoming as real as Kenya and as constitutive of the nation. At the same time that he bemoans his own multiple origins, Kenya's politics harden and communalism becomes entrenched: "The terrible curse of the past is that it always starts right now. Hindsight will pull facts to its present demand; it is the dental brace that will reshape your jaw, your resolve. When hindsight desires enough, it obliterates uncertainty. All the selected past becomes an argument for action" (Wainaina 59). This patriotic history, a story told for the purposes of

power through which "the tribe was made flesh" (59), cannot speak to the totality of the narrator's Kenyan life. Within the nation, at its most distilled level, "three Kenyas live: city people who work in English making their way home; the village and its produce and languages on the streets; and the crowds and crowds of people being gentle to each other in Kiswahili. Kiswahili is where we meet each other with brotherhood" (125). The tension between the chaos of everyday affiliations and the rigidity of a top-down, patriotic notion of Kenyan life permeates the narrative, expressing national commitment, in its truest form, as riddled with contradictions, as a commitment that is not what it is and that is what it is not. As the narrator explains, "We know we sit on top of a rotting edifice; we are terrified of questioning anything deeply. There is nothing wrong with being what you are not in Kenya; just be it successfully. Almost all Kenyan jokes are about people who thought they had mastered a new persona and ended up ridiculous" (151). Yet this contingent, messy, and performative nation-ness, cognizant of its equivocality, becomes something incompatible with the strictures of governmentality and governmental regimes of power, leaving only "small graces" (Wainaina 195) of everyday life for solace against a vertical imperative that would erase all difference.

Nowhere is the play of affiliation and disavowal that creates the space of national commitment clearer than in the figure of Wambui, the narrator's beloved nanny. A girl of only fifteen, Wambui becomes a metonym for Kenya itself, for the narrator's love for Kenya and his lived experience of the nation:

> Wambui, my Wambui is a trumpet, a Gikuyu Scottish strumpet, a woman in long skirts from a Barbara Cartland book cover, from Mum's secret cupboard, *We Danced All Night*. Wambui is broken English, slangy Kiswahili, Gikuyu inflections. She is Millie Jackson. A Malloon Commaddo. She is a market women. A (L)Rift Varrey girl. Third generation. Her aunt is half Nandi, her grandmother a Ngong Maasai. Wambui is Gikuyu by fear, or Kenyatta-issued title deed, or school registration or because her maternal Gikuyu uncle paid her father's

fees, or because they chose a Gikuyu name to get into a coop-
erative scheme in the seventies. Maybe her grandmother, born
in a Maasai home, married in the mixed-up Rift Valley, was
a feared Gikuyu general during the Mau Mau. It could have
been different. Blink. (49)

Wambui, the beloved nursemaid and daring older girl, is a product of
her own occluded origins, at ease within a changing Kenya because of
the plurality and re-written encoding that produce her. Wambui's iden-
tity is built from contingency, whether through happenstance, luck, or
bribery, and her roots are grounded in the unspeakable contradictions
of multiple affiliations and homes. Yet through her dissonance, Wambui
is the embodiment of her Kenyan identity, a shapeshifter written in
many tongues and moving in many rhythms, using the play of disloca-
tions, disavowals, shifting identities, and transnational codes to meet
the demands of change and difference in a national community never
settled. Unfurling across the horizontal, Wambui is the perpetual de-
ferral that forces the nation-space open, unmooring it from the falsity
of a single definition. The contingency of Wambui, wherein she could
always be otherwise, makes her precisely who she is, and yet she fails to
fall prey to the essentialisms of immutability, living her multiplicity. The
notion of unimpeachable, necessary, desired, and true chaos enshrined
within Wambui is underscored by the narrative's conclusion, a paean to
kimay—what Kenya is, should be, has always been, and what its leaders
pretend it is not:

Kimay is people talking without words, exact languages, the
guitar sounds of all of Kenya speaking Kenya's languages. If
kimay brought me uncertainty, it was because I simply lacked
the imagination to think that such a feat was possible. For
kimay was part of a project to make people like us certain of
our place in the world, to make us unable to see the past and
our place in it. To make us a sort of Anglo-Kenyan. Right at the
beginning, in our first popular Independence music, before the
flag was up, Kenyans had already found a coherent platform to
carry our diversity and complexity in sound.

> We fail to trust that we knew ourselves to be possible from the
> beginning. (253)

In the narrative, it is the trust in difference, contradiction, the unknown,
and the unknowable that becomes the heart of national commitment. A
simultaneous sense of affiliation to the land, the people, and that which
is lived plays off of that which is uncertain and only available to the
imagination, creating a Kenya that is coherent in its incoherence, in its
lack of a single story.

Patria and Nation-ness in Contemporary Nigeria

At first glance, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's 2009 novel *I Do Not Come to
You by Chance* has little in common with Wainaina's memoir. The novel
functions as a humorous take on the widespread prevalence of 419,
or email scamming, amongst the youth of Nigeria. Throughout, the
narrative castigates an increasingly corrupt governmental bureaucracy
through the travails of its protagonist, newly graduated aspiring civil en-
gineer Kingsley. At a deeper narrative level, however, the novel reflects a
network of contradicting disavowals and affiliations that suggest a mal-
leable vision of national commitment not at odds with *One Day I Will
Write About This Place*, producing a similar celebration of the contingent
and the incompatible. Nwaubani's novel begins with its protagonist
caught between an idealistic belief in meritocratic achievement and the
realities of a corrupt government system. Raised by a staunchly ethical
and idealist father who taught him "that finishing school and finishing
well was an asset that opened up a thousand more opportunities for
people" (Nwaubani 19), the protagonist-narrator explains, "Not only
did I hear him, I believed him completely. I was brainwashed. I became
an instant disciple" (20). For the young Kingsley, described as continu-
ally "outdistanc[ing his] classmates in academic performance" (20),
success appears given, the result of his hard work and wholehearted com-
mitment to a new Nigeria in which the brightest and best would rise to
improve their society from the top down. Yet, as he soon discovers, "the
way things worked in our society these days, besides paper qualifications
and a high intelligence quotient, you usually needed to have 'long-leg.'

You needed to know someone, or someone who knew someone, before you could access the most basic things" (34). Achievement in this system means nothing. Without the backing of wealth and power, the everyday citizen remains estranged, isolated from the promise of economic emancipation. Still, deterred but undefeated by numerous rejections, when Kingsley is finally called through a highly competitive interview process for a much-desired job at Shell, he is able to believe that "this time would be different" (34) and that he would prove to be the exception to mark the start of a more egalitarian social order in his nation. When this possibility erodes like all others before him, Kingsley begins to find himself swayed by the idea of informal work in the 419 business, represented by his Uncle Boniface, also known as Cash Daddy, a ne'er-do-well turned big man (54). Certainly, the opulence of Boniface's life, marked by luxury cars, clothes, and women, is attractive to Kingsley, indicating a displacement of national commitment by an individualistic greed that does little to differentiate itself from that of governmental ideologues. Yet Kingsley's initial foray into the world of 419 scams is motivated by a far more complex network of desires and obligations that expose what has been called "the gap between subject and nation" (Etsy 49) less as a function of alienation or disillusionment than as a symptom of the dissonant workings of commitment. For Kingsley, it is in the gap between his status as an underclassed subject and the myth of national wish fulfillment that commitment to the imagined community of the nation develops, motivated by his affiliations at the level of lived experience and his disavowal of a system of official channels that exclude the common citizen.

Primary amongst these modes of commitment is Kingsley's sacrosanct dedication to his family. Early in the narrative, it is revealed that Kingsley's father is suffering from diabetes, leaving the family to get by on his meager and often-unpaid pension and Kingsley's mother's income from her floundering tailoring business. While the family faces financial difficulties, it is not until Kingsley's father slips into a coma and eventually dies that Kingsley enters into work for Uncle Boniface. Kingsley's initial disavowal of the governmental order of things, then, is based less in alienation and more in his deep attachment and commit-

ment to his family. Kingsley's turn to the underworld of the informal economy cannot be dismissed as self-motivated but springs from his entrenchment in the network of affiliations across his community, turning his moment of disavowal of the national system into the means through which these commitments may be guarded. 419 is itself presented in a manner that discourages a simplistic reading of disenchantment and corruption. Jordan Smith writes of the "extra intensity of national discourses about corruption in the wake of Nigerians' rising expectations about democracy" (xvi), noting that ordinary citizens "frequently condemn corruption and its consequences as immoral and socially ruinous, yet they also participate in seemingly contradictory behaviors that enable, encourage, and even glorify corruption" (4-5). Rather than viewing the seemingly paradoxical castigation and acceptance of 419 as symptomatic of shortsightedness, however, the novel presents the informal economy of 419 in a manner that demonstrates the complexity of commitment to the imagined community under a governmental regime that functions in absolutes of power and weakness. The roots of 419's success are themselves based in ambivalence and implicated with a transnational idea of Africa based upon colonialist stereotypes and prejudice. Ironically, 419 succeeds precisely because of these images; for the neo-colonialist West, the notion of the wildest schemes from Nigeria seem more than possible, given Nigeria's reputation as a nation broken down by corruption, superstition, and mismanagement (Nwaubani 177). Leveraging this vision of Africa as a space of desperation, Kingsley is able to rapidly ascend the ranks in his Uncle Boniface's operation, helping his mother, funding his sister's education, and allowing other young siblings to meet their needs. In broader terms, the scammer is complicated as a figure when Kingsley begins to perceive the purveyors of 419 as advocates for the common citizen, evidenced in his burgeoning respect for Uncle Boniface:

> I knew, for example, that Cash Daddy was personally responsible for the upkeep of the 221 orphans in the Daughters of Jacinta Orphanage, Aba. He tarred all the roads in my mother's local community. He dug boreholes, installed streetlights, built

> a primary health care center. Just two days ago, I received a letter from the Old Boys Association of my secondary school requesting my contribution toward a new classroom block. I replied immediately to say I would fund the whole project. I knew what it felt like to endure classrooms that had no windows, no doors, and no tiles on the floors, just because the complete funds pledged toward the project had not yet been collected. (263-4)

Seen in this light, the scammer becomes the very embodiment of national commitment, filling the void created by the failures of governmental policies. The open and inclusive nature of Uncle Boniface's good works is held in direct opposition to government projects that are "not for everyone" (246). Able to see the needs that animate their society, the 419ers view the nation in its incomprehensible totality, moving outside of the single narrative of patriotic history to create multiple paths and stories. 419, as a means of individual and communal improvement, thus displays a commitment that arises in the midst of government failures.

The complexities of national commitment in a new Nigeria are highlighted when Kingsley, returning from a trip to Europe, encounters an old classmate at the airport baggage claim. In contrast to Kingsley, Andrew has had the economic privilege of studying overseas, becoming part of a Western-educated elite class through his bewildering collection of postgraduate degrees. Upon returning to Nigeria, Andrew views the nation through the lens of nostalgia, displaying an orthodox nationalist patriotism: "'I'm soooo glad to be back home,' he went on. 'The last time I was in Nigeria was ages ago. There's nothing like being back in your own country, amongst your own brothers and sisters. It's such a wonderful feeling'" (285). Andrew's sense of nation-ness manifests through a singular belief in a homogenous and horizontal comradeship, which unfurls across an undifferentiated space of national belonging to which all members of the imagined community subscribe in equal intensity. This space, the patria, is one of idealism and spiritual commitment and one that provides no room for variation or discontent. Espousing his belief in the importance of the "great minds" that will lead the nation, Andrew

demonstrates an unwavering sense of unstoppable linear development. However, listening to his former schoolmate speaking, Kingsley cannot help but note the utter artificiality of the national avowals that Andrew espouses: "His voice had turned burgundy with nationalistic fervor. I felt like tipping him over a cliff. Were the minds of the 419ers any less great than the minds of the master's degree and PhD holders? It would have been interesting to see what would have become of his great IBM mind if he had remained here in Nigeria" (286). Andrew's "nationalistic fervor," despite his continuous assertions, betrays the exclusions upon which it rests, those fissures that mark the contradictions and tensions that must be repressed in order to allow the myth of the nation as spiritual principle to persist. This mythic notion of nation-ness, one that can only take form through its perpetual assertion through empty speech by this "hot air merchant" (286), masquerades as an essentialism without foundation. Andrew's need to continually proclaim his love for the nation and his inherent sense of belonging to the brotherhood of the community serve as little more than the thin veneer of the patria that attempts to smooth the striated space of the nation through imposition. Yet, while standing and speaking with Kingsley, Andrew discovers his passport missing, shattering his mythologizing of the nation, a space transformed from the idealized patria to a land "seriously fucked up" (289). Departing in disgust, Andrew, Kingsley notes, is left with "his patriotism changed color" (288). It is only in this moment, with his inauguration into what Kingsley calls the "brotherhood of motherland mishaps" (288), that Andrew transforms into a tolerable figure, stripped of his insincere nostalgia for an idealized and imagined Nigeria and forced into a reckoning with the multiple modes of being and becoming within the nation-space. Throughout this episode, ironically, Andrew's rigid adherence to Anderson's notion of the unified mythos of the national imaginary blinds Andrew to the nation's many registers and codes, leaving him unable to experience an engagement and durable commitment. His patriotism proves false, unable to withstand a single assault before reverting to a colonialist disavowal that, severed from affiliation and commitment, turns into a caricature of itself. As Kingsley muses, "No, this country was not fucked up. It was also not a place

for idealizing and auld lang syne. Once you faced the harsh facts and learned to adapt, Nigeria became the most beautiful place in the world" (289). Like the Kenya of Wainana's memoir, Nwaubani's Nigeria is a place that resists reduction, unwilling to be the idealized patria of old or the stagnant waste of contemporary capitalism. The nation, instead, is a space that demands vigilance to its many shifting rhythms, codes, and imperatives.

Curating the National Past

If Wainana's narrative presents a vision of national commitment as inextricably bound to the cacophony of individual life and Nwuabani's novel a vision of nation-ness that contrasts with the vertical imperatives of governmentality, Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* presents a third but not incompatible vision that turns its gaze towards the open space of the future. *The Stone Virgins* covers a nearly forty year span from the 1950s to 1987 in Zimbabwe, which was once Rhodesia, moving through the struggles of Ian Smith's apartheid regime to the momentary jubilation of independence to horrific brutality in the aftermath of the Second Chimurenga. In its historical sweep, the narrative traces the movements of hope, disillusionment, anger, hatred, and fear that have marked the long struggle for the nation to come into being and that left few untouched. While told through the intensely personal experiences of a cast of characters centering around sisters Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the novel demonstrates the ways in which all individuals "have been profoundly affected" by the nation and its struggle to become (Elder 95). The nation, like the narrative, resists dualities, demonstrating "the impact that external action on the national scene has on the personal psychology and relationships of the ordinary characters" (Elder 101) through its diverse and dispersive workings. Multifocal in its form, the narrative unfolds in a non-linear path, rife with occlusions and diversions that move in and out of comprehension and mimic the multiple degrees of commitment that make up the nation. The nation is first represented through vignettes of life in the city of Bulawayo and the nearby village of Kezi, foregrounding the difference and diversity within the city. Through these interweaving vignettes, which move seamlessly

from one space and subjectivity to another, the city, as a microcosm of the nation, is presented as a place of multiplicity and variability, where the chaotic leaps from one to another represent the multiple modes of being, becoming, and belonging within the national space. Insiders and outsiders mingle, together creating the dynamic of the city and, with it, the nation and the continent.

For the inhabitants of the village, Kezi comes first and remains central, the first site of affiliation that is then extended outward to the wider scape of the national community:

> In truth, the bus drives from Bulawayo to Kezi, then back to Bulawayo. But on the slim wooden plaque suspended next to the conductor's window, Kezi comes first, and in the minds of the residents of Kezi, of course, Kezi comes first. . . . Some of the population has been to Bulawayo, and people go back and forth as they please. Some dream of nothing but Bulawayo; some seldom think of leaving Kezi. (Vera 19)

Inhabitants of Kezi are initially presented as diverse, with contradictory dreams and desires and uniquely circulating modes of affiliation with the places and spaces of their lives. The centre-periphery model of the metropolis and its surrounding villages is subverted, as the everyday rhythms of lived experience confound any linear or unitary modeling of space or time. Vera has been described as a writer whose interests extend beyond the divisions of ethnicity towards the nation and the global community in a manner that is far more complex than a tripartite structuring of ethnicity, nationality, and globality might imply (Elder 143; Gunner and ten Kortenaar 5; Zeleza, "Colonial Fictions" 10). By engaging multiple modes of being, all of which coexist despite their different paradigms of belonging and valences of commitment, Kezi becomes a space of constant movement and perpetual de-centering. With independence, these varied registers of being coalesce into a communal sense of relief from bondage, springing from pain but allowing a brief moment of hope as the villagers come together: "They will not drown from a dance in the soaring dust, from the memories of anger and pain. They will not die from the accumulation of bitter his-

tories, the dreams of misfortune, the evenings of wonder and dismay, which should have already killed them" (Vera 52). Yet even a moment with all of the promise and symbolic value of independence cannot enforce a unified narrative, tinged as it is with the fear of what is to come and the myriad of pathways leading through its nucleus. Manifold performances of national commitment are enacted through differing presentations of affiliation and discontent ranging from the shattered psyches of those returning to the village to the women still engaged in the fight to the children conceived of independence and pain. Annie Gagiano writes that "Vera's engagement with the question of war is far larger than the particular scene and period of conflict and social destruction from which it (nevertheless, convincingly) arises" (73). By illuminating the multiplicity of the moment of independence, an event received with jubilation, disappointment, apprehension, and joy, the singular moment is implicated in all it cannot be and will not become. The vertical tale of nationalism, enforced from above by a hostile governmental power, shatters the fragile contingency apparent in the community, destroying it through its totalitarianism. For the sisters, this proves to be the moment of their undoing, as Nonceba is violently raped and mutilated after watching her sister, Thenjiwe, murdered and decapitated (Vera 72-74).

This climactic moment of violent cleaving does not, however, foretell the destruction of the narrative. Instead, the horizontal structuring of affiliation and disavowal persist, resisting decimation as Nonceba, changed irrevocably, nonetheless continues onwards towards a national future that "asserts the possibility of both sexes being capable of the personal development required for social reform" in a "revision of 'resistance'" (Elder 127). The novel ends as Cephas, Thenjiwe's lover, returns to Kezi after having read about his former beloved's murder in the hopes of finding her sister. For Cephas, his return is tied with his desire to "be rid of his own dreams" (Vera 175) by making Nonceba "whole for himself" (176), in a relationship which, while not romantic, remains tied to a form of intimacy. His relationship with Nonceba becomes an affiliation that he is unable to wholly explain and one that he does not expect will replace his grief over Thenjiwe's death but that he feels com-

pelled to strive towards. In a critical narrative choice, Cephas works as an archivist at the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. The museum, as Anderson reminds us, functions with the census and the map to show the "grammar" of the colonialist state and its ideology (Anderson 163). Working together, these vertical institutions attempt to order the wild space of the nation through "a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state's real or contemplated control: people, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth" (Anderson 184). Yet, in his "kinship of desire" with Nonceba (Vera 177), joined through their shared ties of love with the lost Thenjiwe, disavowal of the forces that haunt them, and refusal of the fate they are meant to accept, Cephas displays a very different relationship with nation, memory, and belonging. Thinking of his growing relationship with Nonceba, Cephas muses: "He must retreat from Nonceba; perhaps he has become too involved in replicating histories. He should stick to restorations of ancient kingdoms, circular structures, beehive huts, stone knives, broken pottery, herringbone walls, the vanished pillars in an old world. A new nation needs to restore the past" (184). Despite his stated desire to restore its past, for Cephas, the nation materializes in fragments, suggesting that the story of its past will not be told in the singular but rather through the multiple, contrapuntal, and subaltern discourses of its remnants. The horizontal scattering of vignettes partially articulated by these objects will speak the nation, not the vertical ordering of its institutions. In this thought, Cephas inhabits the moment of re-membering, defined as "scrutinising the relation of the parts to the putative whole; making the historically contingent, although historically concretised, construction and reconstruction of identities the basis of national belonging" so crucial for the nation (Brown 758). Disavowing the replication of static histories and moving back, away from mystification, the narrative unsettles from its moorings what has been called "a deliberately forgotten episode in Zimbabwe's postliberation history" (Gunner and ten Kortenaar 3). Restoring through re-membering, Cephas experiences a commitment to the nation's future through his desire to bring into being the conflictual affiliations and disavowals of the variegated past, a narrative attempt to

"re-vision history away from the impassioned cultural nationalism of the songs of liberation" (Gunner and ten Kortenaar 2).

Conclusions

The representations of national commitment in each of these three texts are diverse and display the variability of modes of engagement with the imagined community of the nation. In each of these instantiations of nation-ness, it is the complex and ever-shifting interaction between modes of affiliation at the level of immediate, lived experience, and disavowal, both of official modes of nationalist belonging and governmental discourse that seeks exclusions and boundaries, that produce the unstable and de-centered vision of commitment that unfolds. In so doing, these three examples of third generation African writing demonstrate that modes of nationalism and national commitment that insist on a unified and unitary national story fail to engage with the diversity and difference from which engagement, from the bottom up, appears. Simultaneously, they demonstrate that the nation and its fragments remain a significant force in third generation African writing, if one that has necessarily evolved over time. Through the complex mechanisms of national commitment that appear in each of these three works, then, the idea of the nation as a singular force is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) called into question in a manner that gestures towards "a recuperated or revindicated nationalism, based not on the fictions of imagined unity, but on a shared problematic: a mutual implication in a history of difference, which acknowledges local as well as global affiliations" (Brown 758) that remains a national commitment nonetheless. By placing their emphases on modes of being that promote difference and division, along with communality and mutually-inscribed engagement, Wainaina's, Nwaubani's, and Vera's literary works illustrate that "a simple retreat from nationalism into multiplicity, division and difference" does not necessitate a neglect towards "the rebuilding of society [that] requires a common commitment and a sense of shared responsibility" (Brown 758). Instead, it is through the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of responsibilities and modes of commitment that society can be imagined outside a reductionist paradigm. In his introduction

to a 2001 special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on nationalism, Kenneth W. Harrow writes that the African "homeland is struggling along many axes, and the consciousness that express the struggles also are giving birth to national identities in all their diversity" (38). In Wainaina's, Nwaubani's, and Vera's narratives, the diverse and unique struggles portrayed by the protagonists demonstrate that these visions of national consciousness cannot be easily distilled to a pure form. Beyond the strictures of binary divisions between disillusionment and commitment, then, these texts demonstrate a mode of being that, while remaining committed to the nation, also views its multiple affiliations and moments of disavowal in a frame that transcends national boundaries and narratives. If, as Clara Joseph has written, "the contradictions and differences that the nation attempts to remove are in fact constitutive of the concept of the nation" (57), it is the very co-existence of affiliations and disavowals that creates an expression of nation-ness through multiple ends, logics, and desires that ultimately call for a reinvigorated engagement that looks towards the future and does not force a choice between the individual and the collective in a continuation of African literature's commitment to the nation in all its contingency.

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