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Third Generation Nigerian Author Through the
Novels of Helon Habila

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Above politics, corruption, colonialism, coming-of-age, education, history, love, and violence, Helon Habila's three novels foreground words. Words, in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water* represent hope in spite of adverse circumstances. On the British Council's Literature website, Susan Tranter describes Habila's body of work and the themes which it contains. She details the way that in Habila's writing "words are portrayed as a positive reaction to oppression" as well as "positive affirmations of the human spirit in face of the oppressor" (Tranter). For each member of society depicted in Habila's works, Tranter sees a link between words and expressing oneself. Tranter writes that words "become the crucial means of asserting individual freedom and self-expression" ("Helon"). Thus, words help the characters within Habila's novels to cope with the difficult situations that they face practically on a daily basis. Words have a positive connotation and offer an escape from the unpleasant realities of life in present-day Nigeria.

Yet, as much as Habila places words at the heart of his novels, the source of these words, the writer, stands before them. In each of Habila's works, a character who writes plays, novels, poems, diary entries, letters, or pamphlets relates the tale. Writers offer the perspective through which all other events are viewed. The main character in each of Habila's novels writes as his main means of entertainment, escape, and financial gain. Lomba, in *Waiting for an Angel*,

composes poems which eventually bring about his release from prison, writes articles that lead to this unjust imprisonment in the first place, teaches English and literature part time, and works briefly for the publication *The Dial*. Mamo, from *Measuring Time*, earns fame in his community after having one of his articles published by a Ugandan scholarly journal. His employment by the Mai brings him a means of earning a living as well as admission into the upper class of Keti. The narrator of *Oil on Water*, Rufus, works as a journalist. It is due to this occupation that he learns about Isabel Floode's kidnapping and begins his friendship and mentorship with Zaq. Writing drives both the plot and the central characters of Habila's novels. Furthermore, additional characters in each work dedicate themselves to writing. Joshua teaches literature at the local high school and James is employed as the editor of a magazine in *Waiting for an Angel*. In *Measuring Time*, LaMamo writes letters which detail his tribulations as a young rebel soldier. Mamo and LaMamo's uncle, Iliya, writes protest letters to the government in the hope of reopening his school. Several journalists appear in *Oil on Water*, including Rufus' fellow journalism students, Malik, Max and Linda, as well as the editor of *The Reporter*, Dan. With so much focus placed on writing and the writer, it is worthwhile to ask what role writing and the writer fulfill both within Habila's novels and in Nigeria on a larger scale.

This thesis proposes to do exactly that. It asks what function the writer himself or herself serves in Nigerian society and how and if the writer's works may also make an impact. The second chapter of this thesis takes up current critical controversies within postcolonial studies. It provides a working definition for "third generation," "Nigerian," and "author." Within the discussion of each of these terms, additional key concerns appear including the history of Nigerian literature, names and characteristics of Habila's contemporaries, a brief summary of Habila's personal history and defining traits, the current struggles of Nigerian writers due to the publishing industry, as well as

the present political atmosphere in Nigeria. The following chapter attempts a review of current scholarship which focuses principally on Habila and his writings. This literature review is organized by central themes, and these themes are approached in relation to the central question of this thesis. Habila's relation to oil and the environment, childhood and the bildungsroman, the nation and the United States, Lagos, protest and the military, in addition to words and writing style is discussed through the lens of the role of writing and the writer. Holes within these articles are revealed and contradictions are considered. The final two sections of this third chapter focus on works which share the same focus as this thesis as well as Habila's own comments on the topic. Through this review of the current state of scholarship about Habila, this thesis both fills a gap within scholarship of Habila, as no such review presently exists, and also justifies the central concern of the thesis itself, as almost all articles contradict the argument which appears in the next chapter of this thesis.

This final chapter performs a close reading of *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water*. It offers an original argument on the depiction of writing and the role of the writer within Habila's works. Furthermore, it asserts that an analysis of this theme in particular which goes deeper than all but the Master's theses discussed in the previous chapter, reveals a distinct function for the writer and his or her writing. Unlike writers from the first and second generations of Nigerian literature, Habila abandons the writer's social role on a large scale. Habila does not depict a reality in which a single writer may impact the lives of multiple members of society for the better. Conversely, the writers in Habila's works focus their attention on individuals. They write either for themselves alone or with a specific person in mind. Thus Habila's take on the role of writing and the writer represents a distinct shift in Nigerian literature. His vision for the future of the country remains just as optimistic as the writers that came before him, but he does not envision Nigeria arriving at this goal through the work of the society as a

whole. Individual members of society offer the solution, and writers in Habila's works have already shifted their focus to reflect this outlook.

Chapter 2

Discussion of Key Terms

Before moving on to a review of current scholarly literature, this thesis will attempt to offer a definition of terminology employed both in its title and throughout its text, using present articles from postcolonial studies. These terms—“third generation,” “Nigerian,” and “author”—will additionally be discussed in relation to Habila’s background and bibliography, as well as the opinions which he expresses in interviews which cover these concepts.

2.1 Defining “Third Generation” Nigerian Author

Hamish Dalley, in her article “The idea of ‘third generation Nigerian literature’: conceptualizing historical change and territorial affiliation in the contemporary Nigerian novel,” explains the rationale behind groupings of Nigerian writers. She writes, “Recent critical discourse on Nigerian fiction employs historicizing techniques that categorize texts according to generations, each of which is presumed to share formal and political qualities and represent a distinct stage in national literary development” (Dalley 15). The term “third generation” comes from exactly this mindset of encapsulating a decided shift in the style and formal concerns of contemporary Nigerian literature. In 2005, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton edited a special edition of *English in Africa* dedicated to the group of Nigerian writers which they termed “third generation”. They

detail how their interest in this project stemmed from their preoccupation with the surge of new writing emerging from Nigeria which had a distinctly different identity, they perceived, from the writing which came before it (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 1). This writing began around the year 2001. In a second special edition of *English in Africa*, which was edited by Adesanmi and Dunton and published in 2008, this concept is again brought up. They argue that this collection of writers could also be termed “children of the postcolony”, a reference to the Francophone group of writers known to Abdourahman Waberi as “les enfants de la postcolonie” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 3). Adesanmi and Dunton, however, give this category of writers the classification “third generation”. This thesis will use the same terminology.

According to Adesanmi and Dunton “third generation” in a Nigerian context refers to a generational timeline which begins with the end of the British colonization and the beginning of Nigerian independence in 1960. It follows roughly twenty-year formations of “generations,” or, twenty years of adult life and writing output. Thus, the first generation lived and wrote primarily between 1960 and 1980, the second generation lived and wrote generally during the next twenty years from 1980 to 2000, and the newest generation has passed the largest portion of its productive years so far beginning around the turn of the 21st century and continuing into the present (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 1). Although these dates are not definitive by any means, they provide a tentative timeline for reference. This designation also references the Nigerian Civil War from 1967-1970 as the source of a seachange in the literary works produced by writers that survived it. Although it falls during the first generations’ adult life, it likewise influenced the second generation and the third generation writers “who either ‘witnessed’ the war as toddlers or were born long after the war had ended” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 3). Therefore, two critical moments in the history of postcolonial Nigeria form the basis of the mentality of the moniker “third generation”. This grouping

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of both a time marker— generation— and a numerical marker— first, second, or, in this case, third— connects with the temporal and spatial components of this moniker for the most recent collection of Nigerian poets, dramatists, novelist, and other writers. These two components will be further analyzed in the discussion of Dalley’s objections to this classification style.

Prior to the third generation came the two first, and founding, generations. To understand more fully the distinction between the third generation and the first and second generations, a brief overview of these prior generations must be provided. The first generation, as already mentioned, wrote principally during the years following Nigeria’s transition from colony to independent nation. Writers in this grouping include Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, J.P. Clark, T.M. Aluko, and Amos Tutuola as well as the female writers Flora Nwapa and Mabel Segun (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction 4). These writers focused heavily on “traditionalization of creative space and idiom, spelt out in the valorization of rural settings... [and] privileging of rituals” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 5). While Nwapa and Segun did enjoy some success, Adesanmi and Dunton argue that the first generation was “largely male-dominated” (“Introduction” 4). Adesanmi and Dunton also describe how drama found a receptive audience during the first generation: “Drama as literature has flourished in Nigeria during the 1960’s” (“Introduction” 3). This, they contend, comes from the large amount of resources and well-formed structures for performance during this time period. Apart from the lack of female voices during the years following 1960 and the strong support of plays, colonialism and a response to the colonial state had the strongest influence on first generation writers. Adesanmi and Dunton explain that writers who composed their works when “the colonial event was in full force” had their textualities “massively overdetermined by that experience” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 4). The existence of a large body of dramatic works, a small minority of female authors, and a preoccupation

with the experience of living under colonial rule all separate further the first generation of Nigerian writers from the third generation.

The second generation of Nigerian authors contains writers such as Ben Okri, Eddie Iroh, Festus Iyayi, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Abubakar Gimba, Zaynab Alkali, Odia Ofimun, Tunde Fatunde, Bode Sowande, Tanure Ojaide, Wale Okediran, and Buchi Emecheta (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 4) (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's" 1). Other authors that fit this designation include Sony Labou Tansi, Williams Sassine, Alioum Fantoure, and Mariama Ba (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's" 4). Adesanmi and Dunton describe how the distance of second generation writers from colonial times shifts the focus of their characters and thus also their literary works: "The second generation were also born into the colonial event but their formative years were mostly shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis" ("Nigeria's" 4). Although writers from this generation often composed works which take place partly or entirely during colonial rule, their works also contained themes separate from those of the generation before them. First, argue Adesanmi and Dunton, some writers from this generation have "a certain radical Marxist bent" ("Nigeria's" 5). Furthermore, they add, "second generation writers such as Osofisan and Niyi Osundare operated principally from the perspective of the traditionalist urtext" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's" 5). In other words, second generation authors still relied on narratives from their country's past tradition in order to inform their contemporary narratives. These authors still wrote back to a center situated during the colonial era. Along with their focus on an urtext from their traditions, second generation writers frequently focused on the question of the nation and had, perhaps, an "obsessive engagement with the nation" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 2). Adesanmi and Dunton clarify, "this engagement, overdetermined by the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War, thus creates 'the sense of an unfinished nation'" ("Introduction" 2). This particular quest to offer a solution to the

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unsolved problem of the nation distinguishes second generation writers from those of the third generation, along with their relation to the traditionalist urtext.

This thesis will now turn its focus to the third generation itself and detail its uniqueness, the genres it contains, and the special topics which it covers. The new, emerging group of writers, the third generation, contains a large number of texts and authors which pertain to the genres of poetry, drama, and the novel. Adesanmi and Dunton argue that, although writers from third generations of other countries on the African continent exist, these writers overall represent isolated instances of success (“Nigeria’s” 4). In the case of Nigeria, on the other hand, a significant number of writers and works from this most-recent generation have been added to the canon. Adesanmi and Dunton explain,

A number of interrelated factors single out Nigeria as the most vibrant case study for third generation African writing. First, is the numerical superiority of Nigerian writers within the continental equation... Nigeria presents a singular case of several hundred writers from the same country who subscribe to the third generation identity and are conscious of that collective image within the reins and dynamics of the broader national literary self-imagining. (“Nigeria’s” 4)

While Francophone writers, as a group, may come close to the sheer quantity of available authors and works for study, they do not represent a single nation. Furthermore, Nigerian texts all have a level of literary quality which makes them “amenable to critical scrutiny” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 4). Nigeria has produced an extensive number of texts which make scholarly investigations necessary and productive. Additionally, the literary works from the Nigerian third generation span different genres. This stands in contrast to the rest of Africa, which still generally relies solely on the novel (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 4). These three factors— the quantity, quality, and variety of third generation Nigerian works— encourage scholarly attention and

make the third generation especially compelling, including for this thesis.

In the early years of the third generation, poetry stood at the forefront of literary production. This poetry was produced primarily in one of two cities—Ibadan or Nsukka. Adesanmi and Dunton detail the beginnings of the emphasis on poetry emerging from either of these two urban centers: “The decade that saw the emergence and the domestic consolidation of the [third] generation, 1985-1995, was almost exclusively dominated by poets who emerged in parallel formations in the two cities which have acquired a reputation in Nigeria’s literary history for being sites of generational beginnings” (“Nigeria’s” 1). Both sites of major universities, they served as centers of interactions with second generation poets and gatherings in poetry cafes which encouraged collaborations. Poets such as Afam Akeh, Amatoritsero Ede, Nike Adesuyi, Kemi Atanda Ilori, Chiedu Ezeanah, Remi Raji, Kunle George, Onookome Okome, Sanya Osha, Nduka Otiono, and Sola Olorunyomi belong to the Ibadan group while poets including Esiaba Irobi, Uche Nduka, Olu Oguibe, Emman Shehu, Maik Mwosu, and Chika Okeke pertain to the group situated in Nsukka (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 1-2). These two cities also had a distinct relationship with Lagos, “Nigeria’s economic capital” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 1). Apart from the concentration of poets within two urban areas, and Lagos, the presence of poetry prizes also fostered the flourishing of poetry during the first few years of the third generation. The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) awarded both the All Africa Okigbo prize for poetry and the ANA-Cadbury prize for poetry to up-and-coming poets (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 2). Harry Garuba’s poetry collection *Voices from the Fringe* additionally offered exposure for young poets from the third generation. The exposure and encouragement of poetry during the formation of the third generation allowed for some success.

At the same time that poetry from the third generation found support, drama from the same generation encountered difficulties. This does not mean

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that the number of plays written and produced has declined, but that the quality of these works has been called into question. Drama in Nigeria has always found a strong base of support, ever since the first generation of Nigerian writers in the 1960’s (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 3). Adesanmi and Dunton write, “Dunton’s *Nigerian Theatre in English: A Critical Bibliography* records the published output up until the late 1990’s, by which time more than five hundred plays by Nigerian authors had appeared in print” (“Nigeria’s” 3). Nigerian playwrights continue to compose, perform, and publish plays through the support of publishing houses in the UK and USA as well as “by well-established local houses such as Kraft Books and as one-off publishing ventures that are often financed by the dramatists themselves” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 3). Yet, scholarly attention has turned away from works of drama, perhaps due to the perceived decline in their academic value. One exception, that is, Biyi Bandele, exists. Adesanmi and Dunton clarify the scope of Bandele’s writing: “His work for the stage includes a highly-praised adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* and a number of boldly experimental works such as *Two Horsemen* and *Happy Birthday, Mister Deka D* that have few kindred in the Nigerian theatre” (“Nigeria’s” 3). Yet, the fact that Bandele’s success at present stands alone in the third generation does not mean that other, undiscovered and unperformed plays do not exist. Adesanmi and Dunton admit that the “disjunction between publication and performance history has important implications for any attempt to gauge the scope and nature of contemporary Nigerian drama as a whole” (“Nigeria’s” 3). Perhaps further research will reverse this current understanding of the state of drama in a third generation Nigerian context.

In contrast to the state of drama, the novel, undoubtedly, has thrived during the third generation. The entire second special edition of *English in Africa* which Adesanmi and Dunton co-edited focuses purely on the “Nigerian novel of the third generation” (“Introduction” 1). Novelists that belong to the

third generation include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chris Abani, Akin Adesokan, Jude Dibia, Maik Nwosu, Uzodinma Iweala, Dulue Mbachu, Philip Begho, Unoma Azuah, Chika Unigwe, and, of course, Helon Habila (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 1-3). Third generation Nigerian novelists distinguish themselves from those of the previous two generations, as well as from writers of their own generation which focus on other genres, through the unique subject matter which they take up. According to Adesanmi and Dunton, novelists from the third generation focus on the northern region of the country and the extremes of sexual abuse— "still relatively unexplored territory in English-medium Nigerian fiction" ("Introduction" 2). Third generation Nigerian novelists, furthermore, bring up migrancy and incest, and employ experimental narrative structures, such as, in the case of Dibia's *Unbridled*, a female first-person voice from the pen of a male author (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 2). They also emphasize "nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 5). These new thematic concerns possibly stem from the third generation's separation from the Nigerian Civil War: "the temporal distance that separates these new writers from Biafra... accounts for imaginings in which art and memory are not prisoners of history, hence the transformation of the Biafra template into broader philosophical probings on the travails of the subject in the context of war and trauma" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Introduction" 3). The break between the third generation and the civil war allows these writers, potentially, to expand the subject matter within their works.

Nevertheless, the third generation of Nigerian writers has dealt with and continues to navigate unstable circumstances within Nigeria. "The formative years of third generation writers were marked by more than two decades of military despotism in Nigeria, the highpoint of which was the illegal detention of Ogaga Ifowodo and Akin Adesokan by the regime of the late General Sani Abacha in 1997," detail Adesanmi and Dunton ("Introduction" 5-6). The

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influence of the strict rule of General Abacha appears in the selection of the themes of deprivation, “the denial of individual human rights and aspirations and... the degradation of social relations under a series of increasingly despotic and corrupt regimes” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 3). It also manifests itself in the large number of prison narratives which comes from third generation Nigerian novelists. Along with the military rule that took place during the early years of the third generation, the postcolonial and postmodern state of Nigeria likewise influenced third generation authors. Adesanmi and Dunton clarify,

we are dealing essentially with texts born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern, an order of knowledge in which questions of subjecthood and agency are not only massively overdetermined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame but in which the tropes of Otherness and subalternity are being remapped by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies. (“Introduction” 5)

Previously accepted concepts, under the not-so-hopeful outlook of the third generation writer, come into question. Additionally, and important for the focus of this thesis, the role of the writer features centrally in third generation novels (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 5).

Five years after the publishing of Adesanmi and Dunton’s second special edition of *English in Africa*, Dalley argues that the classification “third generation” does not fully encapsulate the identity of the group of writers which emerged from Nigeria after 2000. Adesanmi and Dunton foresee his objections and attempt to defend themselves in the introduction to the special edition on the third generation Nigerian novel. They argue, “the project of defining and delimiting the boundaries of a literary generation can never escape the problem of semantic, thematic, and ideological indeterminacy. Factors such as thematic fluidity and temporal overlaps constantly ensure that even the most ostensibly reliable rules of generational boundary-cutting are easily

overwhelmed by exceptions” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 4). Nevertheless, they find that the grouping which they follow offers the possibility of “systematic understanding of literary trends and currents synchronically and diachronically” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 4). Dalley, however, uses two exceptions to formulate his argument that “the ‘Third Generation Nigerian Literature’ concept itself constructs an analogous framework of temporality and territoriality” which does not apply to all authors which appeared on the Nigerian writing scene during the years designated by Adesanmi and Dunton (5). In other words, “This notion of the spatio-temporal imaginary of the postcolonial novel as multiple, accumulative, and ambivalent complicates the attempt to locate literary texts within crisply demarcated historical and territorial frames (Dalley 4). Although Dalley does not wish to reject the term “third generation” entirely, he does wish to stretch it through the inclusion of works which contain more global subject matter.

Dalley cites the globalization of third generation Nigerian literature and writers as a problem for the classification system of Adesanmi and Dunton. First, he argues, members of the third generation often do not work or reside in Nigeria, but rather in England or in the United States. This topic will be further evaluated in the section on the definition of third generation “Nigerian” author. Second, Dalley purports, many novels from the third generation do not simply address the concept of the nation. Instead, they “explore the possibilities of transnational settings and the interpenetration of the global and the national” (Dalley 4). This focus on its own does not completely devalue Adesanmi and Dunton’s terminology. Rather, Dalley argues, this highlighting of globalization questions the validity of a continuation between the first generation, second generation, and third generation Nigerian literature. He asks whether “the phrase ‘Third Generation Nigerian Literature’ should be seen as reflecting a continuity or break with the past and whether these texts affirm a commitment to territorial community or to a cosmopolitan/transnational

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ideal of belonging in movement” (Dalley 3). Dalley does not offer any answer to his own question. Instead, he merely suggests that the framework for the category “third generation” be stretched to include novels which display both a link and a break with spatial location and temporal positioning in order to include literature belonging to or situated within “a dislocated diaspora, or a global non-place” (Dalley 3). In that way, he proposes imagining “space and time differently” but not rejecting the concept of a third generation.

Within the context of this thesis, the term “third generation” will conform to the guidelines laid out by all three scholars. On the one hand, third generation, for this thesis, evokes a continuity with the past in that the topic of writing and the role of the writer has appeared time and again in works from first and second generation Nigerian writers. On the other hand, this thesis will argue, in later sections, that Habila’s proposition for the Nigerian author functions solely in a modern context. His arguments distinguish him from Nigerian writers which have come before, although they draw from them as well. Most importantly, however, the designation “third generation” contains all of the elements which have been detailed previously— a link with themes of despondency and hopelessness, a resurgence of multiple genres, and an abundance of new and promising authors, including Habila, and the postmodern and postcolonial state.

The next section of this thesis will apply this discussion of the meaning of “third generation” Nigerian writer to Habila himself. It will do so through an analysis of Habila’s life. This section will, additionally, detail elements of Habila’s biography which distinguish him from his third generation peers and which form the basis for his relationship with writing and viewpoint on the role of the writer.

2.2 Situating Habila in a Third Generation Nigerian Context

Apart from the fact that Habila was born and writes during the time frame laid out by Adesanmi and Dunton, several other factors make him distinctly third generation. At the same time, as with every writer of the third generation, certain characteristics make Habila unique. Both types of attributes will be discussed in this section, beginning with those qualities which confirm his connection to the third generation.

Habila's history leaves no doubt that he pertains to the third generation of Nigerian writers. In 1972, Habila was born in Kaltungo, Gombe State, Nigeria, to a large family of ten children in total (Cowley 1). Kaltungo is situated in a small Christian pocket within the larger Muslim area. His father, Habila Ngalabak, worked as a civil servant in the Nigerian Ministry of Works and his mother as a seamstress (Bures 1). Habila's father, before becoming a civil servant, worked as a preacher with white missionaries (Agbaje 2). According to an interview with Frank Bures, Habila grew up enamored with reading in Hausa, his native language. Bures explains, "Rather than focus on Nigeria, Habila spent his time in other places: traveling across the desert with the Israelites of the Bible, swashbuckling with Ali Baba in *The Thousand and One Nights*, even riding with Hercule Poirot on the Orient Express" (1). This obsession, described by Bures, links Habila with Dalley's observation on the importance of a global perspective for third generation writers. At the same time, though, "Habila read everything— from the giants of Nigerian literature like Chinua Achebe, Booker Prize winner Ben Okri, and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka to pulp novels by Nick Carter and James Hadley Chase" (Bures 1). Here, Bures also recognizes Habila's connection to first generation and second generation Nigerian writers, situating him firmly within the Nigerian literary tradition. Regardless of whether Habila was most influenced by his reading of

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Nigerian or international works, Habila himself admits that the act of reading and absorbing material from books changed him irreversibly. Bures details, “Habila had no idea which direction his life should take until he found a copy of *Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster. This was the signpost he’d been looking for” (2). At the same time, Habila read Shakespeare, John Donne, and J.M. Coetzee (Cowley 1). From reading, Habila learned the art of storytelling, a talent recognized by his teachers as early as during the fifth grade. They would often parade him from classroom to classroom, allowing him to tell tales to the other students (Bures 1). This love for storytelling and reading Habila also has in common with other third generation writers, who, “share an almost religious reverence for the written word” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 3).

Additionally, Habila shares with his third generation companions a solid educational and academic background. As much as Habila enjoyed reading works of fiction, Habila’s father expected him to follow in his footsteps and become an engineer and learn to enjoy mathematics and science. For that reason, Habila enrolled, after finishing high school, in the engineering program at Nigeria’s Bauchi University of Technology in Bauchi, Nigeria, about two hours away from Habila’s hometown (Bures 1). As much as Habila attempted to build some interest in engineering, he did not succeed, and after one year of studies, he dropped out. Afterwards, he changed to the Bauchi College of Arts and Sciences, where he studied English and literature. He later switched to the University of Jos to pursue the same degree (Bures 1-2). Bures adds, “Habila was lucky, and got a job as an assistant lecturer in English at Federal Polytechnic in Bauchi, a job he held for two years” (2). This employment launched Habila into the world of academia, and allowed him to discover an interest in research, which he utilized by writing a biography of the chief of his hometown (Bures 2). In 2002, Habila received a two-year writer’s fellowship through the School of English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. From there, he became the first Chinua Achebe Fellow at

Bard College in New York (“Helon”). Finally, he accepted a position as a professor of creative writing at George Mason University in Virginia. In between these positions, he served as the William B. Quarton Fellow at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program in Iowa City, Iowa and currently holds a Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD) Fellowship (“Helon”). This time spent researching and interacting with the academic world not only reflects a potential for the high literary value that Adesanmi and Dunton see in the third generation’s writing, but also connects Habila with fellow third generation writers who have also succeeded academically. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for instance, holds, in addition to an honors degree in communication and political science from Eastern Connecticut State University, two Master’s degrees (Tunca).

Furthermore, Habila worked to self-publish his works and self-promote his writing, just as many other third generation writers also did. Habila began to write during his time studying engineering. While at home, Habila would spend hours by himself, reading and writing: “Habila holed up in his room, reading and writing, and soon his father began to worry that his son had no friends besides the characters in his books” (Bures 2). Then, as Habila explains to Jason Cowley in their interview, he began to write the draft for what would later become *Waiting for an Angel* during any free moment he could spare. Cowley writes, “When I met up with [Habila], though, for a walk in St. James’s Park, he was calm and controlled, speaking of how he had written his first book of short stories, *Prison Stories*... by candlelight because the generator in his Lagos tenement block had failed and the authorities took more than four months to repair it” (2). This same determination compelled Habila to seek a publisher for “*Prison Stories*”. He eventually found support through a friend of his father, and “scrounged up enough money to self-publish it under the title *Waiting for an Angel*” (Bures 2). Although Habila technically served as his own literary agent, he posed as a different literary agent in order

2.2. Situating Habila in a Third Generation Nigerian Context

to submit the first chapter of *Waiting for an Angel*, “Love Poems,” for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001. “When the Caine Prize committee wrote back to tell Habila’s publisher that he’d been shortlisted, [Habila] replied anonymously, ‘Thanks for your mail. We’ll let the author know of the good news immediately. We hope that God will guide the judges in their choice,’” Bures details (2). Habila’s persistence and effort to further his career as a writer coincides with that of several third generation writers. For example, Chris Abani continued writing even though his first novel, *Masters of the Board* landed him in jail for six months and his second novel, *Sirocco*, brought him a year-long jail sentence (“Chris”).

Unlike his peers, Habila suffered a trauma unrelated to the military regime or memories of the Nigerian civil war. Habila’s extremely personal trauma involved his family, and thus could not have occurred to anyone else than Habila himself. Cowley discloses “Habila... was 22 when his father and one of his brothers were killed in a road accident in Nigeria. Habila was living at home at the time, having returned there after dropping out from college. He was directionless and despondent” (1). Bures explains the tragedy in a slightly different way: “in 1989, just as Habila was emerging into this new life [of being a writer], his father and younger brother were killed in a car crash” (2). As Bures implies, the loss of Habila’s father, who had been influential in Habila’s life, occurred at a critical point during Habila’s transition into adulthood. Precisely when Habila began to read most devotedly and attempt to write stories with the goal of eventually becoming a professional writer, he witnessed the end of the potential of two of his family members. Although Cowley claims that Habila felt forlorn immediately after the car accident, Habila soon began to dedicate himself to his writing, and Habila says of that time, “to finish my book was an act of will... I couldn’t think of anything else” (Cowley 2). This newfound focus combined with Habila’s perseverance eventually lead to his success. Habila recounts, “I was broke the whole time. But I knew that the

book was the only way for me to kick-start my career as a writer. I managed to finish without cracking from the sheer loneliness and mental pressure” (Page 1). Perhaps this exact struggle fueled the production of novels which Tranter has described as “stories of individuals discovering and dealing with loneliness, ennui, love affairs that don’t quite work out, political corruption, brutality and violence, and the enduring importance of freedom of expression” (1). Although they perhaps arise from a different source in Habila’s case, these particular themes, again, connect Habila with other third generation authors.

This section discussed selected parts of Habila’s biography in order to draw parallels and bonds between Habila and the Nigerian third generation of writers. It did so through an analysis of Habila’s knowledge of international and Nigerian authors, his dedication to becoming a writer, and one particular tragic experience during Habila’s young adult years. Through these analyses, this section has demonstrated that Habila belongs to the third generation not only because of he is Nigerian and born during the 1970’s. The next section will move on to the term “Nigerian” in connection with third generation Nigerian authors.

2.3 Defining Third Generation “Nigerian” Author

In this thesis’ section on the “third generation,” Adesanmi and Dunton’s description of the prolific output of Nigeria, as a whole, in comparison to other African nations is recounted (“Nigeria’s” 3). Yet, the Nigerian authors who produce this abundance of creative works almost exclusively reside outside of their tribal areas or even the borders of Nigeria itself. Adesanmi and Dunton describe the phenomenon that while several talented Igbo writers live inside of Nigeria, none of them any longer have settled within Igboland. This calls into question the relationship between residence and tribal association. Furthermore, the frequent settlement of third generation Nigerian writers in countries other than their homeland raises the question of the nation and na-

2.3. Defining Third Generation “Nigerian” Author

tional identity. Adesanmi and Dunton detail, “Adichie, Abani, Iweala, Azuh, and Nenadi Okorafor all reside in the United States” (“Introduction” 2). They also write, “A considerable number of the poets whose presence and works have been so crucial to the emergence of third generation poetry eventually relocated to Euro-America in the 1990s” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s” 2). Although not listed here by Adesanmi and Dunton, as already mentioned, Habila has also lived and worked for several years in the U.S. Additionally, Bandele moved to London during the 1990’s and has published many of his plays through the British publisher Heinemann’s African Writers Series (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” 2). Chibundu Onuzu also lives in England, and is currently pursuing a degree in History from King’s College, London (“Chibundu”). Chris Abani was exiled to England and has lived in the United States for 15 years (“Chris”). Each of these writers is considered, in Adesanmi and Dunton’s special editions of *English in Africa* and by the authors of the articles which will be discussed in the following section, a Nigerian writer. On the one hand, the most visible source for this designation is that these writers were born on Nigerian soil. On the other hand, many of them choose Nigeria as the setting for their poetry, drama, and novels, but they do not choose exclusively Nigeria. Habila’s *Measuring Time*, for instance, takes place in Chad and Liberia for significant parts of the novel (*Measuring*). Neither of these two characteristics seems to fully encapsulate a definition of what makes a writer “Nigerian”.

Obi Nwakanma discusses the relationship between Igbo writers and national identity more fully in his article “Metonymic eruptions: Igbo novelists, the narrative of the nation, and new developments in the contemporary Nigerian novel”. Nwakanma asks the same questions about the link between migration and Nigerian identity, with an emphasis on movement from rural areas to urban centers as well as other regions of Nigeria by Igbo solely. He writes, “The complexities of these identities also throw up the important

question: what is the identity of highly urbanized children of say Igbo parents, dispersed and living in the cities of contemporary Nigeria, epicenters of hybrid cultures, who have deep roots neither in Igbo culture, nor in the cultures of the immediate localities of their sojourning?” (Nwakanma 2). Furthermore, he asks, “To what nation– given the complexity of the national question in Nigeria– can they belong?” (Nwakanma 2). These questions bring up the issue of not only constant movement of young authors within Nigeria, but also their lack of a strong connection to the history that shaped the lives of the generations before them. As products of a modern society, they do not have the “deep roots in Igbo culture” that their parents or grandparents may have. Yet, a disjunction between the past and a connection to the present are not necessarily related. Igbo authors have produced and continue to produce a large number of literary works in comparison to their Hausa or Yoruba peers. Nwakanma also proposes, “it is important therefore to ask what factors govern the overwhelming presence of Igbo novelists in the production of the Nigerian novel, between the first generation and the later generation?” (3). In the rest of his article, Nwakanma explores this phenomenon.

Nwakanma draws a link between the history of Nigeria and the current debates about nationality. This history begins during British colonial rule. At that time, the Igbo excelled in the education system: “the Igbo... had far outstripped every other Nigerian group in the number of people with secondary education... By 1945, the Igbo accounted for more Nigerians in British universities and by far more in American universities; they had the highest number of candidates admitted to Yaba Higher College, Nigeria’s premier post-secondary institution” (Nwakanma 3). Yet, an affinity for academic success did not affect the Igbo’s presence in the Nigerian Civil War and its after-effects. Nwakanma expounds, “Biafra’s succession, in purely historic terms, marked the second watershed in nation formation, and signaled the ambivalence, dislocation, and marginality that Igbo writers began to associate with their sense of nation and

2.3. Defining Third Generation “Nigerian” Author

national belonging in the aftermath of the war” (4). He adds, “The immediate postwar years were a period marked by deep Igbo ambiguity about the nation” (Nwakanma 4). This contrasts with the previous association of the Igbos with the nation and “pan-African and transnational terms” (Nwakanma 4). In the present, however, Igbo novelists, as detailed by Nwakanma, have reconciled these two ideas— a communal and a disjointed identity:

The Igbo... reflect the slippery nature of current Nigerian identity and its ‘Janus-faced’ complexity. There is today a ‘doubleness’ of Igbo nationalism— it’s radiating between cosmopolitanism and localism— a self-conscious existence at the margins of Nigerian postcolonial history. There is thus reflected in the nature of Igbo identity and its inscription in the contemporary Nigerian novel an ambivalent desire to imagine and constitute a nation within and outside these margins. (5)

From a history which contains both kinds of relations to the nation— both inclusive and exclusive— current Igbo writers have formed a hybrid which incorporates the two. Within this conception, they may remain mobile and global without resigning their Nigerian identity.

Although Nwakanma largely focuses on the link between the question of the nation and Igbo writers, he also stretches his discussion to include writers from other ethnic groups. Using the Igbo writer’s approach to national identity, Nwakanma explains the difference between first and second generation Nigerian authors and authors from the Nigerian third generation: “In very important ways, the difference between the first-generation Igbo novelists and the contemporary generation, in their shaping of the Nigerian tradition of the novel, is that an earlier generation of novelists found in the use of the literary tool a means to celebrate and establish the nation, while in the current phase... the novel is used to question the meaning of nation and national belonging” (Nwakanma 8). This description applies to Nigerian novelists with an Igbo heritage as well as those from other backgrounds. Overall, a preoccupation with the nation distinguishes all contemporary Nigerian writers. Nwakanma

explains that several writers with a focus on the question of national identity have had their novels published internationally: “these include Chris Abani (Graceland), Uzodinmma Iweala (Beast of No Nation), Helon Habila (Waiting for an Angel), Sefi Attah (Everything Good Will Come), Stella Oyeyemi (Icarus Girl), Okey Ndibe (Arrows of Rain), and Ike Oguine (A Squatter’s Tale)” (8). They all share a “tendency to question, as a result of disillusionment, the value of nation and national belonging” (Nwakanma 8). Not all of these listed authors are Igbo. Habila, as already discussed, comes from a Hausa family, and Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, which is in the Yoruba region of the country (“About”). This list illustrates the wide variety of backgrounds that still constitute ‘Nigerian’ writers and Nigerian identity.

For the purposes of this thesis, the term “Nigerian” in relation to authors refers to the spatial dimension of “third generation”. It relates to the physical location in which writers were born, live, work, and publish their writings. It also corresponds with where a writer chooses to set his or her work. If a writer was born in Nigeria and/or has his or her writings take place in Nigeria, then within this thesis, this writer will be considered Nigerian. At the same time, the designation “Nigerian” also links with the way in which writers identify themselves. In Habila’s case, he identifies as Nigerian. On his website, interestingly, he does not list what nationality he claims (*Helon*). In his novels, however, his nationality is clearly listed. On the author’s biography page of both *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water*, Habila’s biography begins with “Helon Habila was born in Nigeria in 1967” (*Measuring*) (*Oil*). Likewise, in interviews, Habila discusses his Nigerian heritage. As already discussed in the section on placing Habila within the third generation, Habila describes his childhood in a Hausa household. Along with describing himself as Nigerian and Hausa, Habila likewise calls himself African. In an interview conducted by Minna Niemi for the Nordic Africa Institute, Habila references a group of African writers “who would like to think that our history was perfect until

colonial times came” (2). By employing the pronoun “our,” Habila groups himself together with other African writers. He also says: “As a Nigerian and an African I have a right to talk about things” (Niemi 2). Here Habila directly lists his association with a Nigerian and an African identity. This thesis will maintain this designation, and, in the following section, discuss Habila’s comments on the nation.

2.4 Relating Habila to the Nation of Nigeria

Along with discussing his nationality in interviews, Habila has also comments on what he perceives to be the role of Nigeria as a nation. Although Habila considers himself a Nigerian, he criticizes the control that the government asserts and the way in which the government mistreats its people. Similar to Nwakanma, Habila begins his discussion with a reference to Nigeria’s history. Habila explains that Nigeria, as a nation, formed through the strong influence of outside forces, specifically British influence: “The colonial encounter grounded us in English education and writing traditions” (Rangarajan 1). After colonial rule, authoritative rulers did not bring about positive change for Nigeria. Habila says, “And perhaps, above all, we have suffered dictatorships, gone through social upheavals and turbulent times” (Rangarajan 1). These traumatic experiences have led to Habila’s skepticism about the success of the nation overall. Habila personally experienced the devolution of Nigeria during his young adult years. Niemi explains: “When attending university, Helon Habila witnessed how students were harassed, locked up, and some of them were killed. This all affected his thinking, as well as his writing of the book [*Oil on Water*], which is unanimously considered to be a very political novel” (1). Habila attributes the unstable atmosphere in Nigeria to its recovery from colonial times. Habila says: “African societies— almost all African societies— are in a formative stage now. Our rulers are not what they should be. Our economy is not what it should be” (Bures 6-7). Habila’s view of Nigeria arises from this

unpleasant personal history as well as the overall history of the nation. He feels that Nigeria does not have the leadership or the economic stability that it should, and perhaps this viewpoint led to Habila's eventual relocation to England and later the United States. Regardless, his take on the nation as a whole is not favorable.

Habila asserts that when the nation fails, as in the case of Nigeria, individuals must rely on other individuals, rather than the ineffective government. Although Habila suggests that the government could institute change, if it attempted to, and offers the suggestion that "the government has to get its act together on the ground" (Rangarajan 3), he argues that the current government does not do anything to improve the situation. For that reason, Habila sides with individuals rather than a collective group. In a keynote lecture delivered at the 2012 Writers Unlimited Festival in The Hague, Netherlands, Habila articulates exactly this sentiment. He says, "Most nations have no place for the individual voice, everything is subsumed under the story of the nation, and that is why the writer, unless he writes in praise of the nation, will always be viewed with suspicion, even hostility. And that is why the writer, the artist, will always be at war with society" ("Literature"). Because the nation does not make a place for an individual who questions it, the individual cannot depend on the nation. Habila articulates, "As long as the nation continues to fail the individual by denying him the most basic freedom and civil rights, so long will the writer continue to walk away from the nation to focus his attention on the individual" (Rangarajan 2). While here Habila may perhaps refer to a figurative walking away from the nation, he also mentions a literal move away from a nation which does not encourage dissidence: "In our globalized world, the writer now prefers to write about the individual, who, tired of not being seen or heard or respected, simply packs his bag and crosses into the next country where he can live more freely" ("Literature"). As a writer himself, Habila casts his "lot with the individual" and asks, "for

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how can I help or change the nation if I cannot even see my fellow man?” (“Literature”) In other words, Habila writes as a single person and attempts to capture the experience of other single persons. This connection with the individual appears again within Habila’s novels, and will be discussed more fully in the chapter on a close reading of the novels.

2.5 Defining Third Generation Nigerian “Author”

Unlike the previous sections in this chapter, this section does not concern itself with a scholarly debate about a critical term surrounding postcolonial or postmodern literature, but rather a vocabulary choice that relates to other types of writing as well. More succinctly than the other sections in this chapter of the thesis, this final section will discuss the decision to use both the word “writer” and the word “author” throughout the rest of the text in reference to a person who produces writings. Although these terms are used interchangeably, the subtle difference will here be noted. Dean Wesley Smith argues that “a writer is a person who writes” while “an author is a person who has written” (“The New”). Smith suggests that a writer, to earn his or her distinction, must actively be involved with writing. An author, on the other hand, must merely publish one work in order to be considered an author for the rest of his life. A writer remains active with writing while an author may choose to become inactive. Additionally, an author must publish his or her works while a writer may simply write privately for pleasure. Smith adds a further difference: “A writer is always focused on the future... an author is always focused into the past” (“The New”). Robin Storey argues that the distinction between author and writer pertains to the source of the idea for the author or the writer’s work (“Writer”). She contends: “If you’re a writer, you can write about other people’s thoughts and ideas, but an author has to come up with the idea, the plot and content” (“Writer”). According to this definition, a biographer or a journalist would qualify as a writer whereas a novelist or poet would be

classified as an author. Here Storey contradicts Smith in that someone who published a piece of writing would be an author for Smith but could be either a writer or an author for Storey, depending on where the concept of the piece originated. According to Merriam-Webster, both a writer and an author are “a person [someone] who has written something” (“author”) (“writer”). In Habila’s novels, characters write their own ideas and the ideas of others and do not always have their works published. Some characters, such as Zara in *Measuring Time*, die before their writings are published, but could have them published posthumously. Due to the blurring of the separation between the terms “writer” and “author” as well as the wide variety of types of writing and writers/authors in Habila’s works, both words will be used throughout this thesis. In this context, both a writer and an author are considered someone who produces a piece of writing, just as Merriam-Webster explains. The other distinguishing elements brought up by Smith and Storey will not be considered.

Chapter 3

Review of Current Scholarship

Having now discussed three key terms in this thesis along with their relationships to Habila's background and opinions, this next chapter will move on to a review of current scholarship on Habila's three novels. It will discuss these articles and Master's theses independently and then relate them to the topic of writing and the writer. Here, it will attempt to reveal this topic as a gap which presently exists within criticism on Habila's novels. This chapter of this thesis will do so by proceeding by topic through the collection of works which focus on Habila, beginning with the topic of oil and the environment. It will furthermore place special emphasis on one article and two Master's thesis which tackle the topic of writing specifically. These works are Clement Chirman's "A Vision of Contemporary Nigeria in Helon Habila's Fictional Works," Ainehi Adoro's "*Waiting for an Angel*: Refashioning the African Writing Self," and Carmen McCain's "Writing the Angel: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*." After discussing the topics which current scholarship focuses on and the way that writing and the writer relates to each of these topics, this chapter will additionally discuss Habila's own writings on the role of writing and the writer in a Nigerian context.

3.1 Habila, Oil, and the Environment

Jennifer Wenzel mentions Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* only in passing in her article "Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature". She discusses the state of Nigerian literature, however, extensively. In one of the footnotes, Wenzel references Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's "The Beatification of Ken Saro-Wiwa" and its connection to Habila. She describes how "Osinubi considers Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*/Prison Stories in terms of the politics of Nigerian literary production in an international context" (Wenzel 463). Furthermore, she details, "Teasing out the ways in which the text itself is enmeshed in the dynamics which it critiques, Osinubi examines Habila's treatments of the 'commodification and representation of suffering for literary profit', where, in Habila's words, 'the quickest way to make it as a poet' in Nigeria is to get arrested" (Wenzel 463). Here, Wenzel refers to the main character, Lomba, and his imprisonment throughout the first chapter of the book (Habila, *Waiting*). Because this article was published in 2006, it would not have been possible for Wenzel to include *Oil on Water* in her analysis, although it relates directly to her themes. Still, she sheds light on the link between imprisonment and writing, a topic which will be discussed in relation to all three of Habila's novels in the following chapter.

This brief mention of Habila's first novel reveals issues which Wenzel picks up earlier in the article. She argues that, in Nigeria, literature relates to oil in that it has been lately commodified for a Western consumer. She uses an early Nigerian novel from 1952, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, to illustrate her point. Wenzel argues that, perhaps, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* originally gained recognition internationally due to the allure of its unique writing style, which she calls "the exotic appeal of an idiosyncratic, perhaps even primitive, prose style" (Wenzel 449). On the one hand, Wenzel recognizes the function of Tutuola's signature style. She writes, "Tutuola's neologism, drunkard, expresses this professionalization of consumption in a way that nei-

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ther drinker nor drunkard could” (Wenzel 449). On the other hand, Wenzel argues that the issue arises from Tutuola potentially catering to a Western, rather than a Nigerian, audience through his use of a vocabulary which sounds especially “African”. This focus results in his novel becoming a commodity for a foreign market, just like any other product which is exported out of Nigeria. Wenzel addresses this phenomenon in her article because, as she puts it, “I am interested in how these texts’ figuration of literature as one commodity among others can help us to understand the Nigerian novel’s trajectory of ‘boom’ or ‘bust’ in the context of Nigeria’s place in an international economy” (450). In other words, as a product of Nigeria, literature relates to the same economic issues as other products. Like these other products, literature can experience a period of success – “boom” – or a period of struggle – “bust”.

Wenzel compares these literary commodities to environmental commodities. She explains, “I draw on the concerns of political ecology in order to suggest how we might historicise the signifying work that commodities do, and how literary production in Nigeria is itself constrained by cultural and material contests over natural resources” (Wenzel 450). She considers political, economic, and social factors which relate to environmental issues and applies these same focuses to literary production and its issues. For Wenzel, the largest issue that currently exists for the literary world in Nigeria is the influence of foreign interests. As already suggested about Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, many magical realist texts cater to a Western audience. Wenzel writes, “Magical realist texts, unlike petroleum, are a renewable resource, but both are commodity exports of the global south in high demand in the northern hemisphere” (456). Wenzel does not state why magical realist texts written by Nigerian authors, like *The Palm Wine Drinkard* or Okri’s *The Famished Road*, are in such high demand in Europe and North America. She does argue, however, that when Nigerian authors serve readers outside of Nigeria, then the literary world in Nigeria suffers. She writes, “Nigeria’s fabled

literary status on the continent [of Africa] is slipping, given declining rates of literacy, struggling libraries, and gutted educational systems” (Wenzel 459). Put another way, while books are purchased from Nigeria in other countries, especially countries in the global North, the literary atmosphere within Nigeria continues to deteriorate. As a concrete example of the results of this downfall, Wenzel offers the 2004 Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG)-sponsored Nigerian Prize for Literature competition. In the end, this Western company decided that no Nigerian work suited the standard which the prize required, and no award was given. Here, although a multinational organization took an interest in Nigerian literary output, they merely passed a judgment on the state of Nigerian writing, rather than truly getting down to the source of this poor state. Wenzel explains, “NLNG managing director Andrew Jamieson indicated that he aimed to intervene in the decline in educational opportunities and the degradation of institutions associated with literature and literacy...yet these same factors were cited in the panel’s decision not to make an award” (460). In this case, perhaps the international organizations connected to Nigerian literary production are at fault.

Yet, Wenzel places the blame on the nation. Just as Habila references the formation of Nigeria through the strong impact of outside forces, Wenzel argues that the nation of Nigeria does not properly support literary production due to its reliance on foreign support. She writes,

If the novel, following Benedict Anderson, offers a medium through which the nation can be imagined, then too the political ecology of oil can reveal how ‘national imaginings [...] also depend on the very materiality of the nation as a life-sustaining habitat- on different modalities of configuring metabolism between society and nature’. The nation, in other words, is not only a polity but also an ecology or lifeworld. (Wenzel 454-455)

When literary output suffers, therefore, it is due to the lack of support from its environment, or, its nation. Similarly as in the case of oil, foreign companies or foreign publishers extract valuable products and leave the nation with only

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subpar products remaining. Wenzel explains that, just as with petroleum exports, Nigerian literature reveals the state of relations between international markets and internal markets in Nigeria. She writes that Nigerian literature “has functioned in a not altogether dissimilar way, both as a medium for imagining a national community and establishing international visibility, and as a site that lays bare the contradictions of Nigerian nationhood and collisions between the state’s image of itself and skeptical critiques” (Wenzel 455). Thus a review of the state of Nigerian literature can expose the state of the nation in general through its connection to the state’s image of itself and the image projected onto it by the international community.

Habila, as previously discussed, argues in a case such as the one which Wenzel describes in Nigeria for individuals to turn to supporting themselves rather than relying on the support of the nation. Wenzel, however, does not offer a potential solution. While she makes a continuous comparison between the extraction of oil and the extraction of high-quality literary works in order to reveal the negative aspects of both, she leaves this comparison unattached to any rebuttal. She ends her article with a final statement on the profit-making attached to both oil and literature in Nigeria as both natural resources in their own right. This thesis will take up the question of the exportation of literature in the following chapter’s close reading of Habila’s novels, especially in its discussion of *Measuring Time*. In this way, it will attempt to address the issues which Wenzel has left open in her article.

A second article, Senayon Olaoluwa’s “In Connivance with Nature: Inter-faith Crisis and Ecological Depletion in Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*,” also connects Habila’s novels and ecology. Opposite of Wenzel, Olaoluwa dedicates most of his article to a discussion of the novel and only a small portion of it commenting on the political situation in relation to the publishing industry in Nigeria. Instead, Olaoluwa draws a link between the environment’s depiction and the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the novel. He

connects what he terms “inter-faith crisis” and the environmental crisis which is happening currently in Nigeria and which also appears in *Measuring Time*. He takes a human-centered approach to his analysis of this issue, and asks, “How, then, does *Measuring Time* relate to these ideas, especially in view of ecocriticism’s implication of the social sphere in the ecosphere?” (Olaoluwa 76). As a way of answering this question, Olaluwa begins by detailing

the way *Measuring Time* tackles the ecological implications of the magnitude of the inter-faith crisis for which the region [Northern Nigeria] is known. It is important to appreciate the novel’s innovative sensitivity to issues of the degradation of the environment by reckless human activities. In other words, rather than expressing his ecological concerns through the invocation of evils and inadequacies of industrialization, Habila engages the impact inter-faith crises can have on ecology and humanity in northern Nigeria. (75)

Olaoluwa finds this focus on the faith aspect of pollution and mistreatment of the environment especially effective because it reveals a similarity between Nigeria and other countries. He writes, “Africa is connected to the rest of the world in the very way it also faces its own ecological crisis— at the center of which are human beings themselves” (75). As human beings inhabit all countries of the world, so too can they relate to a crisis which focuses on the relationship between humans and another entity.

Yet, Olaluwa’s analysis does not delve too deeply into the exact role that humans play regarding the environment and whether the environment or writing truly rests the center of the conflict. He argues that the fight between the Christians and the Muslims in Keti only aggravates the environmental problems: “The situation, it must be further stated, is worsened by the attitude of the people engaged in the practice of these religions and the specific ways in which their interpretation of individual faith can result in disastrous social acrimonies” (Olaoluwa 84). He further specifies, “As demonstrated in the specific case of the conflict between Islam and Christianity in Habila’s *Measuring Time*, the dangerous trend of inter-faith crisis has the capacity to

3.1. Habila, Oil, and the Environment

aggravate the depletion of nature and its resources” (Olaoluwa 84). Olaoluwa uses LaMamo’s and Mamo’s experiences as evidence to support this assumption. Although these statements on the link between humans and human conflicts and environmental problems agree with the depiction of the conflict in the novel, Olaoluwa’s evidence implies that perhaps writing relates more to LaMamo’s involvement than nature. Olaoluwa writes that the postscript of LaMamo’s “first letter reveals the role of nature in a moment of crisis” (79). Perhaps, however, the act of writing means more than the role of nature when LaMamo deals with the dilemma of his military service in Chad. Earlier in his lifetime, LaMamo’s twin brother, Mamo, also relies on words to comfort him. Here, Olaoluwa highlights nature in relation to these words, yet it does not appear for certain that nature is the focus in this moment. He explains, “Mamo survived childhood in the wake of the confirmation of his dreadful medical condition through Auntie Marina’s storytelling ingenuity, in which nature is given centrality” (Olaoluwa 79). Still, it is not clear whether the subject of the storytelling influenced its impact on its soothing function for LaMamo or Mamo. On the other hand, Olaoluwa explains that LaMamo writes a “long, breathtaking letter” from Liberia (Olaoluwa 79). In this case, it seems that the act of writing, in the midst of troubling surroundings, is important for LaMamo, although Olaoluwa does not mention this point.

In the following chapter, this thesis will address the role of letter-writing for LaMamo and the role of storytelling in the lives of both of the twins. This topic, left ambiguous by Olaoluwa, will be addressed in depth and analyzed in contrast to *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time*. Before that, however, the next section will discuss articles which take up the role of adolescence and development into adulthood as their focus.

3.2 Habila, Childhood, and the Bildungsroman

As all three of Habila's novels have young protagonists, it makes sense that the topic of youth and coming of age would be connected with these works. Lomba, Kela, Mamo, LaMamo, and Rufus are all either just entering into or just beginning their adult lives, and for that reason, deal with issues related to maturity and navigating a nation that could be described as going through the same process itself. This section will discuss three articles related to Habila, childhood, and the Bildungsroman, as well as their clear connection to the topic of writing.

Madelaine Hron's article "Ora na-azu nwa: the figure of the child in third-generation Nigerian novels" discusses *Measuring Time* along with the current political situation in Nigeria. She claims that Nigeria should be considered a "child" as it continues to transition from colony to independent nation. She writes, "In third-generation Nigerian texts in particular, it becomes apparent that the child's quest for a sociocultural identity is inextricably linked to issues arising from postcolonialism and globalization, often manifested in the context of repression, violence or exploitation" in Nigeria (Hron 2). In other words, the same issues that affect characters within the fictional world of third-generation Nigerian texts also affect citizens in the real world, specifically through acts of control or abuse. Hron further explains,

the figure of the child in these Bildungsromane may also reflect that of Nigeria itself. In the same way that the child protagonist has to negotiate his/her place in postcolonial society, one deeply marked by Western influence and globalization, Nigeria finds itself having to define itself anew in the global world order. (3)

Nigeria, according to Hron, must now learn how to reconcile its traditional characteristics with those demanded by the new globalized world. This means, "it too must establish a new sense of identity that dwells on its pluricultural values, myths, and traditions but that also contends with the ramifications of increased Westernization and global capital, wrestling with such issues as

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economic disparity, social justice, and human rights” (Hron 3). Because of this new challenge, Nigeria could be compared to the adolescent protagonists in third-generation Nigerian texts, including Habila’s novels.

In these third-generational novels and other works, authors use the figure of the child to experiment with the in-between space found not quite in adulthood but also not firmly in childhood. Hron asserts, “all of the texts that I have analyzed explore the hybrid space of childhood” (11). The use of this particular part of a character’s life is firmly rooted in the Nigerian literary tradition. As Hron explains, along with the use of coming-of-age characters “[t]he abiku-obanje figure is a common trope in Nigerian literature, epitomized by Okri’s spirit child Azaro, Soyinka’s *Aku*, or Achebe’s *Enzima*” (8). Abiku-obanje children add an extra layer of intricacy to the use of an adolescent in that they straddle not only immaturity and maturity but also the human world and the spirit world. “[T]hus seemingly alluding to the precarious position of the child in Nigerian society, as being fated to die and return,” Hron adds (2). Not only does the role of the child hold a central place in first-, second-, and third-generation Nigerian writing, but childhood in general also plays an important part. First, because, as already mentioned, it “represents a particularly resistant space of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of difference that is perhaps not readily accessible in the stable, socially-structured world of adults” (Hron 2-3). This relates to the theme of childhood on its own. Second, childhood resonates with current Nigerian writers because, Hron argues, third-generation Nigeria writers are “themselves children of ‘the children of the postcolony’” (1). Here, Hron claims that the theme of childhood connects with these writers on a personal level. She also argues that this theme has an impact on Western readers of their writing: “Sharing in a child’s viewpoint, Western readers are not only immersed into the egusi pot that is Nigerian affairs or the brewing cauldron of global politics, but also, as discerning adults, are implicitly summoned to contemplate a more

engaged form of global ethics in response to these critical contemporary issues” (Hron 2). Here, she explains that the child and childhood as themes have the ability to cross social barriers due to their universal nature.

Habila is no exception to these generalizations about the function of the child in contemporary Nigerian works. He, Hron argues, uses young characters in his novels for each of the three reasons discussed in the previous paragraph. Habila himself is still a relatively young writer himself, and also has British publishers and readers from around the world. *Oil on Water* has been translated into German and French. *Waiting for an Angel* received international attention after winning Habila the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001 (“Waiting”). While relatively successful in spite of his young age, Habila could still be considered a coming-of-age novelist in that he has only been publishing his works since the beginning of this century. About *Waiting for an Angel*, Hron writes, “Helon Habila’s first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, examines life under the military dictatorship in Nigeria in the 1990s and exposes numerous human rights abuses, from imprisonment without fair trial to socioeconomic deprivation and the right to development” (11-12). *Waiting for an Angel* does this through the perspective of the young characters, Lomba and Kela. About *Measuring Time*, Hron explains, “we observe the diverging destinies of twins LaMamo and Mamo Lamang, whose childhoods were shaped by Biafra: while grown-up griot Mamo Lamang reclaims stories, tradition, and history in his rural village, adult mercenary fighter LaMama [sic] embodies the various wars destroying Africa of the 1980s and 1990s” (11). Although Mamo eventually becomes a “grown-up griot,” a large part of this novel occurs during his formative years. In these short comments about Habila’s first two novels, Hron reveals a distinct focus on the individual. The “numerous human rights abuses” that she mentions become clear to the reader only through the words on the individual narrators, and in *Measuring Time*, LaMamo and Mamo, separately, interact with the larger concerns that Hron brings up here. This

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emphasis on the role of the individual will be analyzed further in the next chapter of this thesis, especially in relation to the individual writer and the individual as his or her audience.

Hron's article focuses on the stories of both young men and young women developing into adults. Differently than Hron, in her article "Weaving Memories of Childhood: The New Nigerian Novel and the Genre of the *Bildungsroman*," Ogaga Okuyade selects only female-focused Bildungsromane for analysis. She does so, she asserts, in order to subvert the existing ideas about what a Bildungsroman must focus on. She writes, "the *Bildungsroman* is a kind of narrative traditionally concerned with unmarked universal identities, that is, with Eurocentrism and the masculine" (Okuyade 162). Rather than take up novels focusing on Europe and written by or about men, as would be traditional, Okuyade writes about two novels authored by and which highlight women—Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Unuma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames*. While dissecting these works, Okuyade also comments on the state of Nigerian writing in general as well as particular characteristics which she attaches to third-generation Nigerian authors and works.

According to Okuyade, the African novel produced today must concern itself with politics and history. In particular, although separated from colonial times by a generation, the contemporary African writer still has no choice but to focus on the transition away from colonial rule. While Okuyade admits that third generation novelists differ from their predecessors, she also argues: "The project of their writing remains the same. Invariably, the outstanding attribute of the African novelist... is an 'immediate engagement with history'... African literature at large and Nigerian literature in particular has been thematically bifocal. It is either geared towards the issue of decolonization or the appraisal of post-independence malice" (138-139). Okuyade claims that because of the society that they were raised in, live in, or at least were influenced by, Nigerian writers have to take up the themes present in this society. She explains, "every

writer derives his/her thematic preoccupation from society. Invariably, the novel becomes the shadow of the society that produces it” (Okuyade 139). In other words, Nigerian writers do not create a new reality but simply respond to the one that they are familiar with. This comment reveals Okuyade’s stance on the role of the writer. She argues that the writer is indebted to his or her society as both the source of inspiration and the foundation for the writer’s formation:

The writer is not only a ‘righter’ (Osundare), but also a sage and a prophet; his or her prophecy is therefore dependent on the society and the ability to translate imagination, which is usually fertilized by society, into reality. Politics and history are no doubt the twin items the African novelist employs as literary and artistic intensifiers. Nobody prescribes to a writer; it is his/her response to exigent and urgent issues affecting society that is of paramount importance to him/her. (Okuyade 139)

Thus, the writer translates salient issues into prose or poetry or drama. On the one hand, this requires the incorporation of his or her individual response. On the other hand, as Okuyade explains, this individual response is influenced heavily by society as a larger entity. The writer’s role, then, is contained in his name; he writes, in the name of society.

Okuyade also applies her argument for the role of the writer to Habila and his works, although she does not necessarily take all of Habila’s themes into account. Okuyade first mentions Habila as part of a long list of writers that she calls “resurgent and rhapsodic voices” (138). Yet, she argues, these voices struggle to find an audience in the society which fostered them. Okuyade clarifies, “Currently in Africa, there is the constant apprehension and anxiety over the inability of the African literati to acquire and assess novels of the third generation of African writers. The dearth of novels in this generation has no doubt created a creative hiatus psychologically. Most of these novels are published abroad and the writers are resident in the West” (137). So while perhaps Africans would read novels produced by third-generation novelists,

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they struggle to actually acquire these novels. Regardless, the novels which are published by African writers, whether those that reside in Africa or not, take up the themes of history and politics discussed in the previous paragraph. They do so through their own distinctive style. Excluding Habila, “[m]ost of these writers employ oral ‘poetics’ such as proverbs, myths and folktales to address post-independence concerns” (Okuyade 138). This practice “not only bequeath[s] a badge of newness and ‘nowness’ to their arts, but also give[s] them a discrete position in the development of the African novel” (Okuyade 138). This description of the third generation writer’s reliance on traditional storytelling methods does not apply to Habila. As will be discussed in the section on Habila’s own comments on the role of the writing, Habila, rather, attempts to remain modern in his writing style.

Habila’s subject matter, on the other hand, fits Okuyade’s description. She lists “asymmetrical gender geometry. . . religio-ethic upheaval. . . the gross infringement of human rights, brain drain. . . environmental and economic devastation of the rich resources of Africa, and political assassination” as problems which are revealed in current writings coming out of Africa (Okuyade 140). In all of Habila’s novels, these themes appear in one form or another, such as in Zara’s struggle to reveal her writing, the war between religions in Keti, Lomba’s imprisonment and eventual run-in with a group of intellectuals all planning to flee from Nigeria, the oil politics that Zaq and Rufus witness first hand, and the discussion of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s execution. Okuyade also claims that “from the 1990s, almost every first novel appears to be a novel dealing with the topic of adolescence” (141). Furthermore, she writes, “Besides the novels being narratives of growth, they exhibit an autobiographical propensity. As debutants, one way to begin writing is to write and repackage the self” (Okuyade 142). These two claims also apply to Habila in his use of young narrators and protagonists as well as the clear parallels between Lomba’s locking himself up in his room to write and Habila’s own first years as a writer

at home, as already discussed in the section on situating Habila in a third generation Nigerian context. Okuyade implies a negative view of this choice of autobiographical information being incorporated into first novels: “[T]hese narratives are sometimes treated as juvenile fiction because of how they often feature children coming of age” (142). As juvenile fiction, they are not seen as worthy of scholarly attention. Yet, Okuyade makes a final, important point in relation to subject matter and Habila. She writes, “The novelist is without a doubt representative of the people at large and his/her story is the story of the people” (Okuyade 141). Whether or not this story is intended for all people or rather individual members of society will be taken up in the following chapter.

Although it does not deal specifically with Bildungsromane, Mitchum Huehls’ article “Referring to the Human in Contemporary Human Rights Literature” overlaps with Okuyade’s in its discussion of the role of writing and the writer as a representative of human society. As the writer in Habila’s works is often also still coming of age, Huehls’ evaluation of them also connects with the coming-of-age novel indirectly in this way. Huehls uses *Measuring Time* as a segway into his discussion of the difference between the “first-world universality and third-world cultural particularity,” as he puts it (5). Huehls argues, “In Habila’s novel, [the] turn to culture highlights the distinction between cultural specificity— comprising local traditions, beliefs, and values— and cultural production, the creative and artistic output of a people” (3). This struggle between the local and the global, according to Huehls, has shifted due to the connection between African writers and Western nations. He explains that it has become possible to incorporate elements from both areas, without compromising the quality of a work:

African authors are neither intractably asserting nor selling out their cultural specificity when they receive training or accept teaching positions at Western universities, nor when they enlist US writers to author or co-author their stories. Instead, this international flow of bodies and their creative cultural productions indicate that the divide between first- and third-world... is

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changing... becoming more 'hybrid, heterogeneous, and processual'. (Huehls 4-5)

The change that Huehls refers to is the interplay of African and Western culture, which still leads to a valid, African art (5).

Huehls, in the first part of his article, speaks about art in general when he discusses the conflict between first-world universality and third-world cultural particularly. In the second part of his article, however, he applies his argument to literature specifically. Huehls clarifies, "[T]he creative cultural productions that I have in mind are literary" (3). These literary works, furthermore, he divides into fiction and nonfiction, and he elevates nonfiction over fiction. Taking up *Measuring Time* as an example of a work of African fiction, he describes Mamo's transcription of Ketí's annual Christmas play. Huehls points out that, although this play was originally conceived as a work on nonfiction about the story of the colonization of Ketí by missionaries, through its improvised retelling each year, the play has morphed into a work of fiction. Huehls writes: "The play, then, has little to do with history and everything to do with the process by which the village resignifies and interprets history" (2). Mamo comes in and offers to write down the work and thus transform it from constantly-adapting fiction into nonfiction. He is not successful (Habla 41). While Mamo's efforts are not appreciated by the villagers, who prefer to recite their play by memory, Huehls sees value in utilizing nonfiction to inspire societal change. He argues that nonfiction has more force than fiction because of its connection to reality. Writing about Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone*, Huehls claims: "[Beah's] work is most effective when it is true. If he were to abdicate its referential value and admit that it does not refer literally, he would be giving up the real political work— the truth and reconciliation— that he needs to memoir to achieve" (11). In contrast, "first-person storytelling seems mushy and vague" (Huehls 11). Here, Huehls advocates nonfiction. He also implies a link between the writer and society as a whole. In the example

from *Measuring Time*, the individual writer, Mamo, writes for an audience of many, the entire cast of the yearly Christmas play. This argument contradicts Habila's depiction of the writer, as argued in this thesis.

3.3 Habila, the Nation, and the United States

Extrapolating Ketu to represent Nigeria, Huehls' argument could also apply to the role of the nation and the responsibility of the nonfiction writer to his nation. According to Huehls, the nonfiction writer's works have the ability, more than the works of the fiction writer, to do the "real political work". In this section, this theme will be explored. The articles which discuss the theme of the nation and one nation in particular, the United States, in connection with Habila's novels will be reviewed. Here, also, the question of Nigeria will be taken up and the answers offered by these five articles and book chapter revealed.

Susanne Gehrman's book chapter "Re-Writing War in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction. From Biafra to Present Times" focuses heavily on war, as well as on the effects of war on the nation of Nigeria. She centers her approach on the narrators of several third-generation Nigerian novels, including those in *Waiting for an Angel* (which she refers to by its previous title, *Prison Stories*) and *Measuring Time*. Gehrman herself summarizes the goal of her book chapter as such: "I will consider in particular the perspective of children and young adolescents on the way, a narrator frequently used by the authors, as well as language and the contribution to renegotiation of history through fiction" (210). When considering the perspective of children and young adolescents, Gehrman's argument relates closely to Hron's. Both claim that children negotiate a special, in-between space. Gehrman explains, "Small soldiers'...are victims who become culprits; they are ambivalent, suspended between innocence and guilt" (211). While Gehrman articulates Hron's sentiment that young characters hold special significance within African narra-

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tives, Gehrman also questions the reliability of these characters. She argues: “The naïve, childish voices of small soldiers in literature allow for an especially effective uncovering of the absurdity of war. And yet, even as they unveil ‘unspeakable things’, the uncertainty and unreliability of these voices challenge the very possibility of representing violence and trauma through literary texts” (Gehrman 211). Gehrman, here, does not specify whether these “literary texts” may also appear within the novels, although assumedly, the same argument could be made about Mamo’s history article or LaMamo’s epistolary descriptions of the fighting in Liberia and Chad.

Regardless of whether they are trustworthy or not, Mamo and LaMamo’s writings deal with the topic of history with war merely embedded within this larger theme. Gehrman details, “[i]n Habila’s *Measuring Time*, war is but the background to a larger family story and a questioning of the narratives of history” (229). Two distinct narratives of history exist within the novel. First, LaMamo details his journey across West Africa as a rebel soldier. His letters capture his transition from child to adult and influence Mamo’s understanding of the world. As Gehrman puts it: “While LaMamo’s war epistles help immensely to sharpen Mamo’s political awareness, they also reveal the twin brother’s development from a naïve small soldier into a disillusioned veteran of wars” (232). LaMamo’s tales have less literary value than those of Mamo, as LaMamo lacks the formal education that Mamo has. “[T]he English used by LaMamo is affected by misspellings and grammatical errors which reveal his interrupted school career. However, these letters are an important structural element of the novel and link Mamo’s research into African colonial history to the violent condition of the present wars,” explains Gehrman (230). Additionally, if one can trust the accuracy of LaMamo’s accounts, his writing adds a first-person eyewitness account to the telling of history, something that Mamo, due to his sickness, can never achieve. They also provide the link between the near and distant past: “[T]hese letters are an important structural

element of the novel and link Mamo's research into African colonial history to the violent condition of present wars" (Gehrmann 230). Not only for these reasons, but also because of his bond with his brother, LaMamo's somewhat juvenile writings still serve an important role for Mamo. Gehrmann writes, "As an historian in his own right, the latter [Mamo] works against amnesia and will also write down the story of his brother whose revolutionary heritage will not be lost thanks to his twin's act of narrative memory" (232). Thus in the end of *Measuring Time*, Mamo subsumes LaMamo's history writing into his own life's work.

Apart from carrying on LaMamo's legacy, Mamo takes up several literary tasks throughout the novel. To start, his avid reading leads him to attempt to compose a journal article on the history of Keti. Gehrmann clarifies, "Mamo's increasing knowledge turns him into a historian who will eventually start to publish articles in refereed journals" (230). Next, Mamo becomes the Mai's official biographer, and takes up the task of chronicling the life of the local authority of Keti. Yet, Mamo does not complete this assignment in exactly the way that the Mai envisioned. Instead, "Mamo strives to rewrite the history of Keti through a (fictional) local perspective and to restore the dignity of his community" (Gehrmann 230). Mamo writes from the perspective of the colonized rather than the colonizer. Still, this tactic does not work, and Mamo abandons his original project for a book he plans to title *Lives and Times of Keti*, which emphasizes the stories of individual inhabitants. Gehrmann claims that this move implies a questioning of history writing in general:

The novel suggests that an alternative rewriting of history must not only break with a colonial perspective on African but that it must also go beyond the perspective of the powerful political and economic elites. Therefore, following the revisionist model, Mamo inscribes the historical traces of common people and their different perspectives into the book. At the same time, he questions the very possibility of objective truth in historical narratives. (231)

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Here, Gehrman argues for the use of history as a record of the lives of those from below, even though it may lean towards fiction rather than fact. Important for the further arguments in this thesis, however, this new take on doing history by Mamo emphasizes both the individual as writer and as subject as well as a departure from previously-accepted modes.

Ebenezer Obadare also focuses on youth culture in his article “In search of a public sphere: the fundamentalist challenge to civil society in Nigeria”. He links young Nigerians to the uprising of religious fanaticism and the problems that it poses for civil society. Obadare writes that the goal of his article is “to solve the puzzle of how, in nearly all cases, the youthful stratum of society is charmed by the ideology of religious fanaticism” (178). In approaching this question, Obadare first defines the distinction between secularity and fundamentalism. Although essentially perfect opposites, put another way, “a public sphere presumes basic secularity and the relationality of religious truths, fundamentalism claims a perfect understanding of the Truth— a refusal of dialogue” (Obadare 179). In Nigeria’s case, fundamentalism rather than secularism plays a more crucial role in the mentality of younger members of society (Obadare 179). Obadare uses the example of the 2002 Miss World pageant to illustrate his point. This pageant, as Obadare explains, was eventually moved to a different host country, rather than Nigeria, due to objections by Nigerian Islamic fundamentalists. This pageant both features young contestants and was and is also largely popular with a younger demographic.

The 2002 Miss World controversy and struggle connects with Habila and his writing through their shared connection to Islam in Nigeria as well as Islam’s feelings towards the West. Obadare explains how Islamic fundamentalists, that is, Muslims who subscribe to the “refusal of dialogue” previously mentioned, reject the idea of the State (182). They also refuse to accept a secularization of any partially-Muslim country because “secularism is not religiously neutral, it is a Christian concept” (Kane qtd. in Obadare 182). On

the other hand, “many Christian Nigerians perceive the Islamic rejection of the secularity as merely reflecting a barely disguised Muslim desire to Islamize the rest of the country” (Obadare 183). This phenomenon of both Christians and Muslims fearing the over-acceptance of the other’s beliefs, ironically, results in a deepening of the presence of religion in the Nigerian state (Obadare 184). Furthermore, it makes “it almost impossible for any event to be seen outside a narrow religious prism” (Obadare 188). Not only is every event observed from this extremely religious viewpoint, but every country is also viewed through the same lens. Obadare writes: “There is no denying that attitudes towards the West, especially the United States, have played more than a peripheral role in religious tensions between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria... no public demonstration... is ever complete without placards denouncing the United States” (188). This topic emerges again in both Habila’s personal life and his novels. Feelings of resentment towards the West in general and the U.S. in particular color the decisions of characters who write and characters that influence these writers. As Obadare points out, religious tension always exists in the background.

Like Obadare, Kwadwo Osei-Nyame investigates the perception and influence of the West in Africa. In his article “Toward the Decolonization of African Postcolonial Theory: The Example of Kwame Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* vis-à-vis Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, and Ike Oguine’s *A Squatter’s Tale*,” Osei-Nyame addresses the issue of postcolonial studies’ view of Africa. Osei-Nyame argues that, although attempting a fair representation of the current situation in the African continent, postcolonial scholars and the postcolonial texts that they produce inevitably still contain a Western viewpoint: “African postcolonial theory... often re-inscribes in its own theoretical practice the very same dominant and hierarchical ideological systems that it purports to interrogate and contest” (72). These ideological systems Osei-Nyame specifies as “an Africa-

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centered but Western-oriented anti-foundationalist and de-essentialising turn within postcolonial studies” (72-73). Put another way, postcolonial scholars cannot help but to employ some sort of lens when viewing Africa, and often resort to a Western one. Osei-Nyame sees this approach, even if unavoidable, as simply perpetuating a long-standing issue. He writes, “[t]he plain fact of matter is that the racist, imperialist, and supremacist ideologies that led in the first instance to the deployment of such binaries as ‘colonizer/colonized’, ‘oppressor/oppressed’, ‘The West and Africa’, etc. still underpin much of the West’s relationship with Africa and the non-Western world” and thus does not facilitate any positive change (Osei-Nyame 76). Still, when it comes to the question of the nation, Osei-Nyame concedes that generalizations become necessary. He asks:

Can we, then, in any sense insist on the rejection of ‘Third World’, ‘Africa’, ‘nationalism’, ‘nation’, etc. ...? The answer is an emphatic no, and...the reason is that when it comes to discussing Africa, we may justifiably speak of its heterogeneity and consequently of the difficulty, but not of the implausibility or impossibility, of making generalizations. (Osei-Nyame 84)

Generalizations, especially those related to the formation of national identity and the role of the nation once formed, facilitate an overall understanding which can then be adjusted through the integration of more specific details.

Perhaps for this reason, authors such as Habila employ a Western-centered viewpoint in their works in order to criticize Western intervention in Africa and to discuss the issue of the nation. Osei-Nyame argues that “Ike Oguine with *A Squatter’s Tale*, published in 2000, and Helon Habila with *Waiting for an Angel*, published in 2002, continue to affirm the validity of the nation as a signifier of ideological legitimation and public debate” (85). Additionally, “Africa” serves as a centralizing idea, or, as Osei-Nyame puts it, “an essential ideological referent” (85). By capturing an “African” mood rather than a Nigerian one, Habila manages to critique the Western custom of grouping all African nations together instead of analyzing each one individu-

ally. Osei-Nyame describes how Habila adeptly employs “rigidly oppositional terms” in the chapter “Kela” in *Waiting for an Angel* (86). Osei-Nyame explains: “The starkly oppositional terms (‘they’ versus ‘we’ and/or ‘us’) in which the discussion is set exposes the theoretical naivety—indeed the ideological blinkeredness—of the critical positions assumed by the postcolonialisms of a de-essentialising bent” (87). This may, furthermore, “suggest that we are in a completely new world situation in which historical binaries such as ‘oppressor’ versus ‘oppressed’ have become redundant” (Osei-Nyame 87). Although Osei-Nyame’s second claim that binaries may no longer have meaning seems possibly overdramatic, these arguments relate to the role of the writer in Nigeria. If, as Osei-Nyame argues, a writer may use exaggeration to expose inconsistencies within society, then it could be that a writer has the responsibility to do so. At the least, a writer must observe them and record them for future generations.

Chijioke Uwasomba offers other possible duties of the writer in her article “Helon Habila: Narrating the Dysfunctional Baggage of a Post-Colony.” She sees a connection between the individual writer and his or her society. Uwasomba argues that the writer has a responsibility to convey particular information to the community: “The writer, irrespective of his or her ideological persuasion has a duty to discharge to society and to self. This is because the writer is saddled with the social responsibility to communicate certain social and personal experiences to an audience” (196). Furthermore, the writer’s product has a social component. Uwasomba explains, “We can argue from the outset that all literatures, whatever their proclaimed orientations, serve one form of public purpose or another” (196). One public purpose, Uwasomba argues, is to create a record of the problems plaguing society at a certain point in time. Uwasomba names this work “faction” and describes it as writing “in which the events of the time period are reproduced as historical and factual realities... wherein the reader encounters lived experiences of... history in its

3.3. Habila, the Nation, and the United States

stark and crudest realities” (197). In other words, the writer serves as historian for his or her society. As an example of this work, Uwasomba references Lomba “the young journalist living in Lagos during the Sani Abacha regime” who illustrates “the criminal activities of the regime and how it affect[s] each of the characters” as well as the rest of the community (197). Lomba, through his writing, creates a written record of the real atrocities during a real period in Nigerian history.

Although Uwasomba argues that the writer and writing relate to society as a larger group, in the additional examples that she gives from *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time*, the writer and his or her writing addresses an individual. About Lomba’s attempt to complete a manuscript for a novel, in order to fulfill his personal goal, Uwasomba writes: “For two years Lomba is locked in his tenement house, trying to write a novel” (198). Uwasomba does not mention the intended audience for this work, although it is likely that only Lomba will read it. Similarly, the writing that Lomba does in prison, earlier in the novel but later chronologically, “provides Lomba with an opportunity to let out the steam [sic] and reclaim his individuality which the prison has stifled” (Uwasomba 200). Here, Uwasomba mentions explicitly the private nature of Lomba’s writing while in prison. Additionally, Uwasomba describes how the writing Lomba produced during his incarceration benefited one individual in particular— the prison superintendent. Uwasomba writes: “It is a poignant irony, but the reality of the human situation is that the prison superintendent who had destroyed the things written by Lomba is now secretly currying the favor of the latter to teach him how to write” (200). In each of these references to *Waiting for an Angel*, Uwasomba represents writing’s value for individual members of society, not society as a whole. With *Measuring Time*, Uwasomba makes similar connections. Uwasomba mentions that “[t]hrough letter writing, LaMamo (now in Monrovia) keeps in touch with Mamo” and that “the Waziri insists that Mamo must do his bidding, that is to write the biography

of the Mai in which the Waziri will enjoy an important presence” (202). Mamo also “writes a letter to Bintou asking her to return to Ketì” (Uwasomba 203). These events each demonstrate the link between writing and single characters rather than groups. Apart from Mamo and LaMamo, other writers in *Measuring Time* rely on writing to benefit individuals. Uncle Iliya “is seen collecting signatures from the Ketì people to be sent to the military governor urging him to reopen the Ketì Community School, and it is expected that this school will train a new set of leaders that will bring to bear the wishes of LaMamo” (Uwasomba 203). Even though Uncle Iliya’s petition could benefit the community if it convinces the military governor, simply sending the letter respects LaMamo’s dying wish. All of these examples together raise the question as to whether writing and the writer in Habila’s novels serve the community or singular members of it.

A final article on the role of the nation, Adélékè Adéèkó’s “Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination,” like Obadare, focuses on the perception of the United States within Nigeria. Completely opposite to Uwasomba, Adéèkó centers his argument on the link between individuals and other individuals. He writes: “The struggle for the recognition of the individual within the nation state is still being waged, and that struggle itself constitutes the main subject of narrative reflection” (Adéèkó 24). The reason for this focus, according to Adéèkó, is the lack of any unified nation state in Nigeria. This lack of national unity results in the nation having “no self-consciously designed story to tell itself” (Adéèkó 12). The individual steps in to fill this void. Instead of the undivided nation, the unified individual thrives (Adéèkó 11). In other words, in novels by third-generation Nigerian novelists, “[s]ingle-minded, self-assured protagonists fail to become centers of progress in these novels not because nationalists embody some inherent epistemological deficiency; they fail because the Nigerian nation state lacks sturdy democratic guarantees for its citizens” (Adéèkó 11). Therefore, society is abandoned for

the sake of the individual, even if the individual must struggle.

Individuals in unsteady Nigeria, because of this lack of loyalty to the nation state, no longer feel the need to sacrifice their lives for Nigeria's benefit. Instead, they emigrate from Nigeria, often to the United States. Adéèkó explains that the "affective constructs that hold together the order of mutual recognition in the nation. . . those cultural motions deeply embedded in the patriot's psyche and which instigate him or her to act on behalf of the nation, are absent" (22). Furthermore, the desire to die for the nation no longer exists: "Although one can choose to 'die' for the nation. . . abandoning one's nation of birth seems imperative for those not willing to die yet" (Adéèkó 17). Even though "going to America amounts to abandoning responsibilities at home," those who feel that they have no responsibilities at home have no misgivings about leaving it. In *Waiting for an Angel*, "Habila presents two views of America: the innocent Kela introduces the convention that makes American a safe harbor for 'those who can't live in their own country;' meanwhile, Rafiki's reticence holds up the once historically popular view that America spells death of the patriotic spirit necessary for regeneration the African nation space despoiled by colonialism and slavery" (Adéèkó 15). More characters in *Waiting for an Angel* and other third-generation Nigerian novels share Kela's view than Rafiki's. In fact, Adéèkó argues, "Without America, Amusu, Rafiki, Ifeoma, and Elvis would either be 'disappeared' or locked up to rot away in some obscure prison, waiting for a regime change" (17). On the other hand, "naiveté about regarding absolute meritocracy in American academic institutions might make a reader squirm about the susceptibility of Nigerian youths to the myth of America's incorruptible goodness" (Adéèkó 16). As Habila's novels end before the reader learns about the lives of the characters that immigrate to America, this worry remains inconsequential.

3.4 Habila and Lagos

Despite arguing that characters in third generation Nigerian novels feel no strong connection to Nigeria due to its failure to attain stability, Adéèkó concedes that some characters have loyalty towards Lagos. These characters, furthermore, may not have been born in Lagos: “In Lagos, saying ‘I was not born here’ will be an absurdly lame excuse for not fighting back and claiming ownership” (23). Feeling allegiance to the city does not come from natal roots. Three articles deal with Lagos in connection with Habila’s writing. These articles will be discussed in this section, beginning with Chris Dunton’s “Entropy and energy: Lagos as a city of words.”

Dunton argues that the city, notably Lagos, offers the perfect setting for organizing collective action. This applies in literature as well. Dunton writes, “Lagos is characterized...not only as a site of disorder and decay but as an environment in which creative energies are nurtured that are held to constitute a corrective and liberatory force” (1). Lagos features so prominently in recently published works, that Dunton claims that Lagos has become perhaps the most popular city in which to set a novel: “Lagos has, by the early years of the twenty-first century, become established as one of the world’s preeminent fictionalized cities, as with London and Paris more than a hundred years before” (1). Lagos serves as the setting for contemporary Nigerian novels, possibly, because it provides reference to social movements for political change as well as “an acknowledgment of the potential for communal energization” (Dunton 3). Put differently, because the city brings together so many people, it provides an appropriate setting for the formulation of groups with the goal of positive adaptations. Dunton explains, “part of the task of the Lagos novel now, it seems, is to bear witness to the city’s resistance to positive change” (4). A second part of the task of the Lagos novel now is to reveal the importance of “cognition and action, and in particular the possibilities inherent in the act of writing (or some other form of expressive activity) as a means to assert a

3.4. Habila and Lagos

meaningful existence” (Dunton 5). Thus, writing and societal change go hand in hand in Nigerian novels set in Lagos.

Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* is no exception to Dunton’s description. Writing, on the one hand, relates to witnessing reality and creating identity. Dunton uses the alteration of Morgan Street to Poverty Street as an example. He argues that this episode reveals “the novel’s projection of the principle of giving account” (Dunton 5). This highlights not only the importance of the name change to the people living on Poverty Street, but also to Lomba, as an affirmation of his own identity. Dunton describes it as “securing his own validity” (4). Lomba discovers his identity through his writing. This holds true for other third generation Nigerian novels as well as *Waiting for an Angel*: “[I]n general the emphasis is on the value of the written– and published– word in achieving self-validation and in contributing to the contestation of an oppressive State apparatus” (Dunton 5). In *Waiting for an Angel*, “the idea of writing as life-saver, as self-validation, as a steering mechanism for political activism, is... strongly centered” (Dunton 6). The theme of writing as a powerful force pervades the entire novel, not just the Morgan Street/Poverty Street scene. Dunton clarifies, “The purpose of writing and the impact of the written word remain foregrounded through the novel” (6). Yet, despite the positive potential embedded in writing in *Waiting for an Angel*, it also contains a negative aspect for the writer. Habila describes the unpleasant struggle for Lomba, the aspiring writer, when he cannot finish his novel due to “writer’s angst, writer’s block” or some other reason (Dunton 5). Additionally, although Dunton argues for the emphasis of the written and published word, his essay begs the question as to whether the written or the published word has more force. In the context of societal change, publishing a text, or at the very least finding an audience, seems necessary in order to reach out to others.

Rita Nnodim also discusses the link between writing and identity in her article “City, identity and dystopia: Writing Lagos in contemporary Nigerian

novels.” She describes the purpose of her article as an analysis of the sources of identity in an urban setting: “This article sets out to explore the poetics and politics of urban spaces and identities in an African metropolis, by studying how the novels map the geography of the city and portray its people and the myriad of ways through which they negotiate selves and identities in the spaces they inhabit” (Nnodim 321). Writing, Nnodim claims, “is central to the politics of space and identity” (330). This writing contains both an element of pessimism and an element of optimism. At the level of society, writing seems to produce no change. Here, Nnodim makes a connection to postmodernism. She writes, “the loss of belief in utopian urban imaginings is related to an absence of loyalty to the postcolonial nation-state and, by implication, to other grand narratives, metanarratives, and the very notion of a unitary self” (Nnodim 330). In other words, the novels that Nnodim discusses take on a postmodern view of the city, as well as a view shared by Adéèkó. At the level of the individual, writing also does not prove effective: “A fundamental notion of dislocation, a feeling that ‘things have fallen apart’, seems to characterize this void” (Nnodim 330). On the other hand, although writing may not bring about any concrete change, it does still have promise. Nnodim explains, “each of the narratives discussed here in its own way moves beyond disillusionment, inertia, and complacency, and opens up perspectives on the possibility of hope and change— simply by virtue of the act of telling their stories” (331). Therefore, for the writer, the act of storytelling has positive value.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, storytelling has potential implied benefits for the community as well. Nnodim describes Lomba as an antihero, yet someone who decides “to break his silence and give voice to the concerns of the people” (330-331). He does this even faced with the prospect of ending up in jail, which, the reader learns, does eventually happen. Lomba, in the beginning of the novel, only stumbles upon writing due to the encouragement of his editor, James. Lomba realizes that he must choose between writing and

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silence. Nnodim explains, “Lomba is not a political activist: his identity as a writer and journalist is ambivalent...It is his editor, James Fiki, who insists that refusing to be silenced is a historic necessity” (326). The choice to speak up rather than remain silent turns Lomba into a fighter for his people’s rights as well as his own identity: “refusing to be silenced means participating in new configurations of urban activism” (Nnodim 326). Although Nnodim argues that writers in *Waiting for an Angel* eventually “move beyond disillusionment,” Lomba remains ambivalent “about getting involved in political activism” (327). Furthermore, “Habila’s novel is permeated by a general sense of ambivalence about any form of activism which borders on pessimism” (Nnodim 329). Admitting that *Waiting for an Angel* does not see community empowerment in a strictly positive light perhaps calls attention to the problems of working at the community level. While Lomba endeavors to bring a voice to the neighborhood of Poverty Street, in the end he brings only violence from the authorities and a lengthy incarceration for himself. For this reason, perhaps writing for an audience of more than one has grave obstacles.

Although Chielozone Eze does not specifically refer to Lagos in his article “Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Negotiating Transculturality in Contemporary Nigerian Novels,” he describes an urban space full of movement and various cultures. This description could apply to Lagos as well as any other present-day metropolis. Eze defines transculturality as “the existence of insterstices, or the state of endless crossing of boundaries...the movement of subjects from one place to another” (100). Due to Lagos’ population explosion in the twentieth century as well as its identity as an international hub, it may also be considered transcultural. For this reason, in Lagos “community is no longer restricted to people from the same ethnic group” (Eze 104). This new definition of community naturally calls into question previously-established modes of identity formation and leads to uncertainties. Transculturality, according to Eze, brings with it the unsettling of “hitherto stable and monolithic identities” (101). In

other words, through contact with people from different socio-economic or religious backgrounds, one's perception of oneself is challenged. Habila brings this topic to the forefront of *Waiting for an Angel*. Eze argues, "In Habila's world, transcending boundaries implies the full exercise of freedom and the realization of hitherto unknown possibilities" (102). Additionally, "This idea of freedom, of the struggle to transcend boundaries, is the novel's thematic cornerstone" (Eze 103). Both freedom and identity relate to writing and the writer.

Like exposure to different peoples in a large city, writing also expands horizons and challenges identities. This may be hopeful or not. First, poetry allows the mind to escape present realities. Eze describes how Lomba's poetry helps him to survive his time in jail: "Lomba lets his mind feast on poetry. . . Poetry thus achieves the double function of freeing Lomba's mind and bringing in an 'angel' in whose 'ample bosom' Lomba buries his face" (102). Poetry provides an outlet and solace for Lomba. Because Lomba writes love poetry for the prison superintendent addressed to the prison superintendent's girlfriend Janice, love and poetry are also linked in *Waiting for an Angel*. Eze argues that love, like poetry, helps to cross barriers. He writes, "Poetry and love are developed as thematic elements [in the novel] capable of transcending the boundaries of race and ethnicity" (Eze 102). Lomba also writes fiction, which also alters reality. Eze utilizes the party held at Emeka Davies' apartment as an example of fiction re-writing reality. Habila writes himself as a character at the party, thus interweaving fiction and the real world. Still, Eze sees the main purpose of writing as capturing the human condition: "The fiction writer does no more than put the human experience in a given narrative format. Regardless of whatever form s/he uses, the underlying principle is the delineation of the human condition" (107). This human condition reflects the transculturality of present-day Lagos and other parts of the world. Eze believes that this phenomenon represents a positive trend. He writes, "Helon Habila's

Waiting for an Angel is an unapologetically hopeful narrative” (Eze 101). This statement seems unlikely, as none of the characters that fight for improvements of their situations actually achieve them. Whether or not the novel contains hopeful elements will be discussed further in the upcoming chapter.

3.5 Habila, Protest, and the Military

The changes to reality and identity that Dunton, Nnodim and Eze discuss in their articles, although linked to writing, do not come about without some conflict, if they come about at all. This conflict often arises during protests and features the Nigerian military. As the following five articles will show and discuss, the military has a long history in Nigeria, and can be held responsible, in part, for the current impoverished state of many of the Nigerian people. For this reason, members of the lower classes support writing as a form of active resistance against both military violence and dictatorship. Writing also serves to document the atrocities committed by the military while in control of the country.

Sule Egeya connects writer’s block and the unwritten novel with military misrule. In his article, “Idiom of Text: The Unwritten Novel in Recent Nigerian Fiction,” he argues that despite the difficulties imposed on aspiring Nigerian writers by the military, they have a responsibility to witness and record history. Egeya explains, “Emerging Nigerian writers, especially novelists, are inevitably saddled with the burden of history. Their engagements demonstrate the organic connection between art and history” (Egeya 109). On the one hand, this history belongs to all Nigerians, and is not abstracted but “is a simple past...shared by a people” (Egeya 109). Yet, on the other hand, the subjects chosen by Nigerian novelists, Egeya argues, reflect a personal history. He writes, “most of the writers write themselves out: that is, they embark on a historicism that seeks to dramatize their own experience; they recreate socio-political realities that they have all lived, witnessed, interrogated. Writing is

therefore an act of memory that the writer... approaches with a sense of duty” (Egya 109). That the Nigerian writer chooses his own life as subject matter does not invalidate it; this preference reaffirms Nnodim and Eze’s description of writing as identity formation. It does, however, raise questions about the effectiveness of this method for representing a shared history.

Egya contends that, in *Waiting for an Angel*, Lomba never finishes his novel because he lacks support and encouragement from society. Rather than feeling strengthened by the people around him, Lomba writes in spite of them, and furthermore in spite of the military. Lomba’s incomplete novel highlights the failings of his community and his government. Egya states explicitly: “Lomba fails to be a writer because his society does not give him the wherewithal to become one” (116). Lomba’s unfinished novel stands for the decades within Nigeria’s history— the 1980’s and 1990’s— in which novel writing practically ceased in Nigeria. Egya explains: “The unwritten novel is therefore a metafictional metaphor for the spatiotemporal absence of textuality, the inability of the novelist... to engage in his craft in a turbulent season of survival. The unwritten novel is the symbol of the barrenness in creativity that existed in the terrible decades of oppression in Nigeria” (109). The military carries a large part of the blame for the oppression that Egya describes. It brought with it anguish and additional worries related to angering its head, the dictator: “The immediate enemy of the writer was not even hardship but the calculated strategy of the dictator to eliminate writers” (Egya 110). Underneath these restraints, both real and fictional Nigerian writers could barely “provide the basic necessities of life for themselves” (Egya 111). The unfinished works of aspiring writers living under the overbearing regimes in Nigeria in the late twentieth century, due to these additional obstacles, speak for “artistic, psychic, cultural, and national” collapse (Egya 111). In other words, Lomba’s “novel is unwritten because the nation, gripped by despotism, will have nothing to do with art and craft” (Egya 117). Lomba attempts to

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fulfill his responsibilities to society as a writer, however, society does not allow Lomba to do so.

Yet in spite of seemingly insurmountable impediments, Lomba serves an additional function for his society, on top of capturing its history. Lomba's activism works towards a time in the future in which writers will have the freedom to perform their craft. Egya calls this goal "the freedom for creative writers that will come after the collapse of dictatorship" (118). The desire for activism comes from the "instinctive drive for survival in the face of poverty and hardship" which emerges from the society's stifling of creativity. Unable to finish the manuscript of his novel, Lomba turns to activism in order to still contribute to society in a productive way. Additionally, Lomba's shift to protest allows him to actively fight back against the system which robbed him of the necessary environment for writing. Egya details, "Lomba also mutates, from being or trying to be a writer to being a journalist-activist, in order to effectively confront the oppressive regime" (116). Lomba becomes a different type of writer, and thus also produces a different type of writing: "The novel as a creative entity is suspended, untextualized, giving way to journalism, pamphleteering, and activism desperately deployed to deal with present circumstances" (Egya 116). Here, Egya claims that under particularly stringent conditions, the amount of time and focus necessary for composing a novel become unobtainable, and thus the faster and easier to distribute pamphlets and articles become preferable. This may also suggest that the type of writing produced by a country reflects the type of governing style which that country employs. Either way, Egya's argument focuses on the effects of society on the writer, rather than his audience.

Ali Erritouni, likewise, writes about the effects of an oppressive regime on the writer, in this case, on the character Lomba from *Waiting for an Angel*. Different than Egya, he does not focus on the effects of the act of writing on the writer, simply on the plight of the contemporary Nigerian writer living in an

authoritarian society. Erritouni claims, in his article “Postcolonial despotism from a postmodern standpoint: Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*,” that, faced with strict governmental control of writing, nonviolence rather than violent activism becomes a necessary path. Erritouni further contends that Habila does not put forward any cause for the current tyranny in Nigeria or any specific solution. Erritouni describes how the narrative of *Waiting for an Angel* centers around Lomba: “Waiting [for an Angel] manages, however, to create a sense of narrative cohesion by foregrounding Lomba’s story. . . His harrowing experiences as a prisoner, his reflections on the political social conditions in Nigeria, and his interactions. . . connect the chapters” (3). Yet, even though the novel follows Lomba’s story primarily, it does not condemn the formation of the society which causes many of Lomba’s hardships. In direct contrast to Egya, Erritouni explains: “Just as he balks at considering the imbrications of the African penitentiary with colonial sovereignty, so Habila avoids addressing the colonial origins of the state of exception” (4). Habila, Erritouni argues, goes one step further to state that the people currently suffering in Nigeria must not resort to violence in response to their abuse. Erritouni writes, “Habibila, by contrast, maintains that armed resistance merely provides the state with a pretext to further persecute its hapless victims. . . he considers untenable the conception that the masses can successfully counter state violence with a violence of their own” (6). This claim does not necessarily offer a solution to state mistreatment, but simply a way of keeping it at bay.

Although Erritouni argues that Habila does not offer any particular solution to the tyranny present in Nigeria, Erritouni describes two options that Habila rules out as potential answers. Along with presenting nonviolence as a manner of avoiding further governmental abuse, Habila, Erritouni claims, sees no role for the revolutionary writer or intellectual writer in society. The revolutionary writer, as implied by the previous paragraph, promotes a violence which will only fuel the government’s retaliation. “Habibila considers

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revolutionaries to be impudently optimistic, unable to reckon seriously with the disparity between their inadequate means of violence and the military might of the postcolonial nation-state,” Erritouni writes (7). As Adéèkó argues, death does not seem a preferable option for those not treated kindly by their government: “Habila considers death— an eventuality that, moreover, promises to be violent— may be the most oppressive fate that military regimes can deal their hapless subjects” (Erritouni 7). Thus the revolutionary writer only increases the likelihood of his death, the worst punishment doled out by the state. The sentiment of faithlessness in present-day Nigeria captured here is also articulated by Egya. While Habila rejects the revolutionary writer for the damage that he or she may bring about to himself or herself, he dismisses the intellectual writer because of his or her potential damage to society. Erritouni asserts, “Habila denies intellectuals the right to impose their conception of the ideal commonwealth on non-intellectuals. He trusts that the masses can formulate on their own the contours of a promising future society, one that resonates with their needs and aspirations” (10). Still, Habila does not put forward any feasible plan for bringing about this promising future society, Erritouni claims. Erritouni’s arguments about Habila’s rejection of these two types of writers become especially interesting in light of Mamo and LaMamo in *Measuring Time*, as will be brought up in the following chapter.

Perhaps the worst punishment that Lomba receives as a result of his writing could be his time in prison, a topic discussed in Niyi Akingbe’s article “Saints and Sinners: Protest in Waiting for Angel.” On the other hand, Akingbe asserts that prison, unlike society, strengthens Lomba. Furthermore, Lomba’s prison sentence serves as a device for Habila to criticize the political situation in Nigeria in the last years of the twentieth century, which Akingbe calls “the political crisis in Nigeria in the late 1990s” (28). This political crisis includes “torture, victimization, and brutality” (Akingbe 17), all of which Lomba endures during his incarceration. Yet, in spite of the trials that Lomba

endures, his perseverance represents protest against the ruling regime of Nigeria. Akingbe describes Lomba as “an intellectual who is directly involved in the struggle of his society for social justice in a cynical military regime” (29). Contrary to Erritouni’s claims, Lomba’s identity as an intellectual writer does not hinder his ability to facilitate change. In fact, his time spent as an intellectual in prison only makes him more effective. “Prison in *Waiting for an Angel* strengthens Lomba,” Akingbe contends. Additionally, prison and writing go together in Lomba’s form of protest. Akingbe explains,

Lomba’s defiance of the prison situation to continue with his writing is employed by Habila to underscore a notion that prison does not negate the continuation of social struggle and protest against injustice in society. It is not a euphemism for surrender on the part of the writer or political activist, nor does it connote defeat. Rather, it fortifies the writer with the needed mental rejuvenation required to continue with the social struggle against all social and political vices from without. (29)

Thus the writer, like Lomba, has the responsibility to use his or her writing as a form of activism, especially in the face of personal tribulations.

Akingbe’s argument that writing must prevail in spite of the struggles of the writer suggests a strong connection between writing and the real world. Writing must contain an element of truth, even if this writing could be on the whole characterized as fiction. Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika takes up this point in his article “Military Dictatorship in Nigerian Novels: A Study of Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*.” He argues that writers always combine fiction and nonfiction in their compositions: “Writers only select materials from our real world and blend them into their fictitious works” (Asika 276). Thus, writing has value because it offers a “picture of society and of life” (Ker qtd. in Asika 277). Lomba also captures the truth in his writing. Asika describes him as “a journalist who writes about the truth” (283). Here, Asika sees Lomba as a writer who uses the truth as the central theme of his works, rather than simply blending it into the background.

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This ties in with Asika's argument that writers "are the moral consciousness of the society" (288). They do not only capture the truth but also determine what the truth is. Because of the responsibility that comes with determining the truth, writers, according to Asika also have the charge of helping society recuperate. Asika writes: "Writers should rise up to the challenges of helping the society regain all they lost. It is the duty of writers of the present day to guide the country to attain an environment free of corruption, intimidation, exploitation, manipulation, subjugation and denigration, among all the seeds that fertilized during the military era" (288). Yet, writers also must caution themselves against too much power and "should guard themselves against the excesses of our leaders even in the present dispensation as some military men turn to civilians in the guise to lead and prosper the country" (Asika 288). Asika argues that the writer must remain unconnected to the military and in touch with civilian society. Therefore a writer must necessarily remain one of the many rather than one of the elite.

As all of the previously discussed articles in this section condemn the role of the military and hold up the writer and writing and one option for a response to military abuses, so to do Jonas Akung and ED Simon denounce military control in their article "The Military as a Motif in the Nigerian Novel: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*." Akung and Simon side with Akingbe that the intellectual writer can and should also serve as an activist. They argue that several third generation Nigerian writers, including Habila, "view the military as the architect of modern corruption in Nigeria" (Akung and Simon 56). Habila, specifically, "sees the military as an unjust authority whose language is that of oppression" (Akung and Simon 57). Worse than the military as a whole are their leaders and the "human right [sic] abuses, police and military brutalization and the violent revolt across the nation" that these leaders oversee and do not interrupt (Akung and Simon 56). These crimes against society hurt the common people of Nigeria more than anyone else. Habila uses his writing

as a tool for teaching society about alternative realities and bringing about awareness. Akung and Simon write: “ [Habila] uses the novel to explore the ways of making the people understand the harsh realities of their recent past under mean, self-centered and self-serving military gangsters masquerading as leaders” (56). Similar to the other scholars discussed in this section, Akung and Simon see the suppression of academia as a serious crime committed by the military and its leaders (57). They contend that the lack of intellectuals contributes to the slow development of Nigeria: “This lack of thinking has remained a major setback on the economic development because the military has killed all creative minds and the great minds have remained unproductive and sterile” (Akung and Simon 57). Interestingly, Akung and Simon conclude that, although Habila supports thinking and learning throughout *Waiting for an Angel*, he also advocates revolution. They write, “this paper agrees with the vision of the author [Habila] that the need for a violent revolution has become imperative” (Akung and Simon 58). This assertion remains unexplored in the remainder of the article.

3.6 Habila, Words, and Writing Style

The previous sections of this chapter have discussed overall themes identified as central in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water* and discussed by scholars. This section will shift its focus to articles which primarily address the structure of Habila’s three novels. These five articles discuss the way that Habila’s texts themselves function, rather than the themes which form a part of the texts.

Anindyo Roy’s article “Auto/Biographer, Historian, *Griot*: Measures of Realism and the Writing of History in Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*” contains an analysis of both a major theme of *Measuring Time* and the structure of the novel itself. The discussion of the novels’ structure, however, occupies the majority of the article, and for this reason, it is included in this section.

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Roy discusses the major theme of the conflict between the public and the private, present in other third generational novels as well. Comparing Habila with Adichie, Roy writes, “they have refigured, in markedly distinctive ways, the narrative forms that embody the domain of the personal and the public. Helon Habila, in particular, is concerned with the multiplicity of histories” (5). Here, already, Roy hints at the structural element of *Measuring Time* which will make up the majority of his article—historiography and narrative authority. Roy also comments on the uniqueness of Habila’s approach to writing history. Unlike the generations before him, Habila incorporates elements of magical realism which change the relationship between the public and the private in *Measuring Time*: “[Habila] works out a new trajectory for representing the private and the public in fiction, significantly modulating the dominant forms of realism inherited from the first generation of African postcolonial writers” (Roy 5). Habila, thus, tackles history and autobiography together, and plays with narrative authority while doing so.

The joining of history and autobiography in *Measuring Time* allows Habila to comment on the continuity of history in Nigeria. Roy argues that Habila “reveals history to be dynamically constituted by its own contradictions” (10). Differently than earlier Nigerian writers who viewed history as a continuous stream of events that could be traced back to a single occurrence as recorded by a single historian, Habila uses his narration style to reveal his stance that history does not remain continuous. Rather, history is influenced by the person telling it and the way in which that person recounts it. Roy puts this another way: “Habila thus introduces a form of historiography based on teasing out and working on the possibilities offered by the interlinking of autobiography and/as history along lines that disrupt the naturalizing discourse of a tradition that demands allegiance to a singular and synoptic historical vision” (23). Habila plays with history-telling through the character Mamo. Mamo serves as historian, autobiographer, and perhaps also the traditional musician

or storyteller known as a griot. These overlapping roles provide the opportunity for a single character to tell similar histories in different ways, in that way demonstrating the potential for variations of the same history. Roy describes this as “the doubling, overlapping, and sometimes-contradictory perspectives of the autobiographer and the historian” (11). Mamo’s role as historian, however, relates most closely to Habila’s project of questioning history-telling. Roy explains, “It is Mamo’s choice to be a historian– and particularly, a teacher of history– that allows the novel to work out the boundaries that constitute the relationship between history and fiction” (13). As Mamo comes to terms with the fiction inherent in any relating of history, he reveals the distance between his manner of documenting history and that of prior, realist writers. Furthermore, as already mentioned, “the act of writing or scripting ‘history’– reiterated throughout the novel– highlights those aspects of the novel that point to questions of narratorial authority and authorship that conventional realism had failed to address in earlier works of fiction” (Roy 16). Put another way, Habila further distinguishes himself from first and second generation Nigerian writers through his questioning of the reliability of the writer.

Ebi Yeibo and Tamunotonye Alabrabra comment on a shared characteristic by all Nigerian writers and other writers around the world, that is, style. In their short article “Sound and Stylistic Meaning in Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*,” Yeibo and Alabrabra examine the relationship between a structural element and the effect it produces. They make a couple of comments related to the writer and style. First, they claim that a writer’s style can be influenced by a number of external factors: “Style is the term to capture this inherent human phenomenon, which is also applicable to one’s distinctive mode of expression, both orally and in writing. The style of a writer... is informed and shaped by an aggregate of his social and political background, religious inclination, cultural values, experience, educational attainment, geographical location and exposure” (Yeibo and Alabrabra 1062). Here, they argue that

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a writer's style represents a combination of the writer's decision to write in a certain way as well as the influence of a large number of other elements outside of the writer's control. Second, Habila's particular style, Yeibo and Alabrabra argue, serves his goal of adding beauty and aesthetic effects (1065). As an example, Yeibo and Alabrabra cite the repetition of the word "tap" to produce the sound of glass being hit by a walking stick and "to add rhythmic beauty to the work" (1067). Although they could go much further into depth about what Habila's style in *Measuring Time* does rather than simply intensifying its beauty as well as what external factors in Habila's environment have informed his stylistic choices, Yeibo and Alabrabra leave their claims underdeveloped.

Style, as Yeibo and Alabrabra argue, affects the overall reception of a text. Similarly, Madhu Krishnan argues, closure alters the way that a reader responds to a text, depending on whether or not closure exists within that text. Krishnan contends in his article "Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure in the Third Generation Nigerian Novel" that the lack of closure in recent third generation Nigerian novels mirrors the lack of any "simple resolution to the past" (186). This argument connects with Roy's contention that Habila refuses to accept any overarching history in his novels. It furthermore echoes Roy's claim that this particular view of history as unreliable distinguishes third generation Nigerian novelists from their predecessors. Krishnan explains, "the third generation of Nigerian writers has returned to the wider thematics of first generation literature, but with a view to questioning the assumptions earlier literature made about Africa, Nigeria and the validity of historical realism when confronting the past" (187). Although, as Krishnan claims, third generation Nigerian writers have less trust in the past than the Nigerian writers which came before them, they still use references to the past to understand the present. First, they "remember the trauma of the past to forge a sense of kinship and identity through their shared connection in community" (Krishnan 187). In other words, the memory of the Biafran War and colonial times

creates a feeling of unity for those who suffered through it or have family members which suffered through it. Second, history gives contemporary Nigerian writers the opportunity to “seek to make sense of the present tension and ethnic strife in their country through an interrogation of the past” (Krishnan 187). These two objectives of bringing Nigerians together and explaining the perpetuation of tribal tensions also connect with the use of closure in third generation Nigerian novels. Krishnan writes, “the traditional conception of closure allows these narratives to block any simple resolution to the past and its traumas and instead forces a lasting engagement with history and its effects, mirroring in the aesthetics of (non)closure the thematic importance of the text” (186).

In *Measuring Time*, Habila does not offer closure for Mamo’s narrative. At the conclusion of the novel, the reader does not learn what happens to Ketu or how Mamo deals with Zara’s death. Furthermore, Mamo’s role as a biographer for the Mai does not become definite. Krishnan claims: “Mamo’s status as a writer is left further ambivalent” (191). He argues,

Though the narrative continually hints towards his becoming the biographer of Ketu, repeatedly using the formula ‘When Mamo wrote his biographer of...’ to introduce new chapters and characters, in the narrative proper this never occurs; the biography he is hired to write for the Mai is never written and the story of Ketu is never told. (Krishnan 191)

Krishnan additionally argues that Habila chooses to conclude *Measuring Time* without any closure in order to call attention to the unreliability of overarching metanarratives, a distinctly postmodern stance. Contrary to a novel containing narratological closure, which makes “ideas like modernity, colonialism, history, and nationalism seem homogenous and closed,” Habila makes these concepts appear just as incomplete as the storyline of *Measuring Time* (Krishnan 193). On the other hand, Krishnan describes Habila’s skepticism as Nigerian, rather than postmodern. He asserts, “In a nation repeatedly violated by colonialism, sectarian violence, ethnic conflict and military intervention after military in-

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tervention, the notion of logic through closure remains elusive, as the nation itself remains dynamic, in flux and in a constant state of death and rebirth” (Krishnan 193). Nigeria’s current state, thus, is reflected in the novels produced by its writers. The present day, as much as history, influences Nigerian novelists.

Two final articles deal with the structure of Habila’s novels. The first article, Kerry Vincent’s “(Re-)Forming stereotypes: Modes of mimicry in Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*,” contains a discussion of the goal of writing back. Similarly to Krishnan’s claims, Vincent asserts that the structure of the novel as a biography written by Mamo allows a member of present day society to appropriate colonial history. Vincent structures his article around an examination of “the novel’s larger project of writing back” (49). This act of responding through writing criticizes not only the abuses of the past but also uninformed attitudes of current times. Vincent explains that “introducing and then dismantling colonial stereotypes, or appropriating and attaching them to local authority” allows Habila to respond to their traditional meaning, and create a different meaning of his own more relevant to the present (48). Furthermore, “Habila salvages empire’s stereotypical rubbish and draws our attention to the unique conditions and effects of its production, the result being a censuring of colonial representations and condemnation of postcolonial pretensions” (Vincent 48). Writing back also links with control. Whereas during colonial times Nigerians did not have complete control of their country, by responding to this time through writing, they can adopt some authority (Vincent 50). Vincent uses the Keti villagers’ yearly Christmas play as an example of adapting history to reflect the present. He writes, “the whole community participates as the actors re-enact colonial contact, translating that singular event into something they can now control” (Vincent 50). Although Vincent argues that writing back serves a social function, he also asks, “Does Habila’s engagement with figures of colonial power not bolster and extend [its] very influence?” As-

sumedly, although Vincent leaves it open, the answer to this rhetorical question is no.

Tayo Lamidi and Romanus Aboh also address the problem of responding to British colonial control in their article “Naming as a strategy for identity construction in selected 21st century Nigerian novels.” Lamidi and Aboh argue that a conscious use of inter-tribal names promotes a community across the whole of Nigeria and that the employment of English names solely for characters with questionable morals fights back against “English domination” (43). Overall, third generation Nigerian novels contain far more Nigerian names than foreign. Lamidi and Aboh argue that this stems from a desire to compensate for needing to write in English: “Most writers would prefer to use Nigerian names for their characters as a way of preserving their identity and compensating themselves since they have to write in English to be nationally and internationally intelligible” (40). Because of the association of English with colonial rule, most Nigerian writers “seem to have a negative attitude towards English” (Lamidi and Aboh 39). Not only do they use English names to demonstrate an act of resistance (Lamidi and Aboh 42), but they also “dismantle English domination by characterizing English names with negative meanings” (Lamidi and Aboh 43). While fighting back against British dominance, Nigerian novelists also promote a unified cultural identity for Nigeria (Lamidi and Aboh 41). According to Lamidi and Aboh, this stems from the fact that “most educated Nigerians think of themselves as Nigerians. This may not be their primary allegiance when the chips are down, but it is an everyday operative identity secured by Nigerian proselytes. Moreover, this pan-ethnic, cross-regional Nigerian identity is one that the novelists themselves promote” (42). For these reasons, readers “do not favour writers of their own ethnicity or books about their home regions. Rather, they are curious about how the novel portrays a Nigerian identity and how it addresses the country’s socio-political developments” (Lamidi and Aboh 42). The even mix of Yoruba, Edo,

Igbo, Hausa, and Izon names in third generation Nigerian writing echoes this feeling.

3.7 Writing and the Role of the Writer According to Other Scholars

The six previous sections have explored the connection between common themes in scholarly works about Helon Habila and his three novels and comments on the role of the writer. Whether focusing primarily on oil, childhood, the nation, Lagos, the military, or structural elements of Habila's works, each of the articles and book chapters discussed in this chapter of this thesis have also included brief remarks on the function of writing in contemporary Nigeria and the purpose of the writer within his society. This theme of the function of the writer, however, has been placed in the background. In three additional works, the role of the writer is the main focus. These two Master's theses and one journal article will be discussed in this section, with special attention given to their stances on the writer and the individual.

Carmen McCain dedicates an entire chapter of her Master's thesis, "Writing the Angel: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*," to re-orienting the role of the writer. She argues that the writer, unfortunately, does not have much power in Nigerian society because of his or her refusal to engage in politics. At the beginning of the chapter, McCain simply claims that writing cannot overcome all of the obstacles set up by the Nigerian government: "Although writing and storytelling is given a powerful place at the center of the novel, the pen has its limits" (78). By "limits," McCain refers to the inability of a piece of writing to defeat physical force. Furthermore, in Lomba's case, "his pen is no literal match for the guns of the soldiers" (McCain 79). Here, McCain echoes the statements of Erritouni and Adéèkó about the threat of death. Yet, these statements by McCain refer to the writer's product rather than the

writer himself or herself. For the writer, a lack of commitment to becoming active in politics restrains his or her power. About Nigerian writers, McCain argues, “they are more concerned with their own literary self-advancement than political engagement” (79). This claim reveals the selfishness that McCain identifies in the attitude of writers. She describes this selfishness further: “The poets [sic] calls for action are useless because they are not doing anything practical— they are writing to benefit themselves. . . are unwilling to commit to any kind of true action” (McCain 80). Both the shortcomings of writing when put up against weapons and the selfishness that McCain sees in Nigerian writers depicted in *Waiting for an Angel* lead to an overall loss of power (McCain). Writing and the writer, when acting alone, do not have the necessary strength to overcome all hindrances.

Yet, according to McCain, the writer fulfills a function in society through his or her transcribing of the community’s dreams and desires for the future. The power that McCain feels that writers lack in contemporary Nigeria can be brought back to them through reaching out to the community. McCain explains: “This power comes from encounters with others, whether community encounters like Lomba’s conversations with Joshua or Kela, or encounters with other texts like Habila’s written dialogue with Soyinka, Ngugi, Sankara and others” (81). Contact with other people, either in person or through absorbing their writing, allows the writer to step outside of himself or herself and better understand those around him or her. Furthermore, by capturing the voices of the people that he or she meets, she serves a purpose for society. McCain writes, “It is the writer with the social imagination, who can reflect the many contradictory and incongruous voices of the community” (81). In doing so, the writer regains a bit of influence. He or she becomes a transcriber of the people’s thoughts: “The writer, therefore, becomes a tool in recording the disparate dreams of the people and in synthesizing them into a greater unified dream” (McCain 82). The writer, additionally, can exercise liberties

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when writing down the thoughts of the people. He or she obtains the ability to “imagine alternate realities” and also bring some of those realities into being (McCain 83). McCain calls this capability “the significant role the writer plays in activating a social imagination that can escape fiction into reality” (McCain 85). Interestingly, McCain only offers this role of the writer as a possibility. She does not argue that Nigerian writers undeniably fulfill their potential role, and only makes this more doubtful through the employment of the terms imagination and dreams.

Ainehi Egoro also dedicated her Master’s thesis, “*Waiting for an Angel: Refashioning the African Writing Self*,” to discussing Habila’s first novel. Additionally, she comments extensively upon the history of the role of the writer in Africa from the time of Achebe and Soyinka to the present day. She dissects the position of the third generation of Nigerian writers first before tackling Habila’s position separately. Egoro argues that the third generation sees the social aspect of writing even more than Nigerian writers which came before them:

[T]hird generation writers are strongly driven by the assumption that writers have a social role with serious consequences for collective resistance against power. I would even go as far as arguing that third generation Nigerian writers articulate a more refined representation of the artist as a social entity and of writing as a collective process precisely because they do not take the social function of African writers and writings for granted. (4)

Yet, even though Egoro points out a distinction between third generation Nigerian writers and writers of the first and second generations, she also implies a connection between them. She argues that third generation writers simply expand upon ideas presented by earlier generations. For all three generations, writers filled a special place within their communities, at once part of and apart from those around them. Egoro explains, “African literary discourse has traditionally privileged an autonomous, transcendental writing subject with, arguably, authoritarian sensibilities” (30). Put another way, “in articulating

the social and political justification for their art, African writers have not always engaged the consequences of being embedded in the social, the ideological implications of this embeddness [sic], and other external material variables that come into play” (Edoro 30). Here, although Edoro uses the term “African” writers in general, this description also applies to Nigerian writers. These Nigerian writers both fulfill a purpose for their society, and yet see themselves as somewhat separate from it.

In Habila’s novel, however, this description of the writer as removed does not perfectly apply. Edoro considers Habila’s writings distinct from those of other Nigerian writers due to his foregrounding of the theme of writing and the writer: “Helon Habila, in *Waiting for an Angel*, does not take the social function of the writer and the public performance of intellectual life for granted but instead makes... [it]... a major critical concern” (30). Edoro suggests that Habila takes up the question of the role of the writer by both acknowledging and reinterpreting the stances of Soyinka and Achebe. She writes, “Habila does not necessarily do away with the question of writing in society or writing for collective survival, neither does he represent the social mandate of the African writer as some sort of grand narrative that needs to be deconstructed” (Edoro 30). Instead, “Like Achebe and Soyinka, Habila upholds the traditional notion of the African writer as a social figure and the notion that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power” (Edoro 30-31). In this way, Habila continues with the tradition of rooting the writer within his or her society. Yet, at the same time, Habila does something differently than his forerunners. Edoro writes, “he explores what Sartre calls the historical particularly of the writer’s subjective constitution and function by exposing the ideological limitations and external constraints that make any autonomous and transcendental representation of the artist outmoded and detached from social realities” (31). By placing the writers in his stories in particular circumstances which make interpreting them in a more general way unproductive, Habila

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comments on the contradictions inherent in the social role of the writer and suggests new, modern collaborations between “the literary intellectual and ‘the people’” (Edoro 31). Thus, Habila’s interpretation of the role of the writer cannot be applied to all African writers, like the comments of Achebe and Soyinka. Habila’s works remain linked with the time and place in which they occur.

In Habila’s case, this time and place refers to the Abacha regime, and Habila works, thus, must be considered in light of these particular social circumstances. Habila reveals the role of the writer, but this role has been adapted to the society surrounding a writer during the 1990’s in Nigeria. Edoro discusses the distinct political situation and its influence on the role of the writer at this point in Nigerian history. She calls the political atmosphere a “paranoid context of persecuted print” (Edoro 32). Edoro, furthermore, lists the number of contradictions present at this time. She explains that the writer “is compelled to confront the subjective contradictions that make it difficult to let out a public message, social vision, or final truth; the contradictions that define the intellectual’s relationship with a social collective...and the contradiction embedded within transcendent expectations for the traditional African literary intellectual” (Edoro 32). Here, Edoro considers the writer an intellectual as well. The writer, she argues, cannot overcome the restraints set out by the government nor the hopes of the people. Edoro adds that a writer’s potential is “bound up with particular material situatedness [sic] and ideological restraints” (33). In other words, under certain circumstances, like those of Nigeria at the turn of the 21st century, a writer cannot reach every person in his or her community, nor can he or she even realistically overcome overwhelming ideological or financial opposition.

Edoro argues that in *Waiting for an Angel*, the writer turns to writing for himself or herself alone. The audience becomes not every Nigerian but rather single Nigerians who may benefit individually from reading. Due to

perhaps the despair of struggling against the Nigerian government, the third generation Nigerian writer depicted in Habila's novel changes from the entirely social writer that Achebe suggests to an only semi-social writer. About Lomba, Edoro writes: "Despite the social grounding of the intention to tell stories that can cure the ills of the world or to write the survival of the collective, Lomba sees writing as a venture of the individual creative mind" (35-36). Although the writer that Achebe alludes to resides "deep within the social" (Edoro 36), in Habila's time and works, this is not the case: "Within the world that Habila constructs, a world hemmed in by all sorts of external material limits, this form of artistic subjecthood [mentioned by Achebe] is not only ahistorical but also divorced from social realities" (Edoro 36). Here, Edoro does not fault Achebe for his inability to predict the social situation of Nigeria when he discussed the role of the writer twenty years earlier, but simply offers that his arguments do not apply perfectly to Habila's novel. Lomba presents a further problem in that, unlike the other characters in *Waiting for an Angel*, he prefers to isolate himself from society completely. Edoro explains that Lomba "does not feel a connection with the social collective" (44). Additionally, he wishes "to be connected to society only marginally" and his "individualistic sensibility drives his creative pursuits" (Edoro 44). While Edoro directs her arguments towards Habila's first novel only, other characters in his second and third novel fit this description. Edoro's claims will be further discussed and applied in the following chapter, particularly in relation to Mamo in *Measuring Time* and Zaq in *Oil on Water*.

Clement Chirman addresses all three of Habila's novels in his article "A Vision of Contemporary Nigeria in Helon Habila's Fictional Works." He does not place special emphasis on Lomba, but instead considers characters from *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water* as well. Taking into account Habila's entire body of published works, Chirman claims that society forms the center of the goal of writing and the writer. This stance supports McCain's claims

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and contradicts the final argument of Egoro. Chirman writes, “It is not surprising... that literature, over the years, has established the norm of serving as a vital tool for social engineering; for creating social awareness and redirecting as well as projecting the society into the significant future” (63). Here, Chirman appears more optimistic than the previously discussed critics. He argues that literature, and therefore the writer as well, have the potential to change the world, and furthermore have been doing so for some time. He does not write about the potential for change, but the change that has already been brought about by writing. This refers to Nigerian writing as well: “Nigerian literature is strongly imbued with the passion to change and redirect society” (Chirman 64). Society, in turn, Chirman asserts, responds to literature’s push for reform. Chirman writes that “[t]he conclusion therefore is that Nigerian literature, history and society are all working in complementaries to address modern issues of common concern within the polity” (64). As examples of the cooperation between society and writing in Habila’s novels, Chirman uses *Lomba* and *Mamo*. About *Lomba*’s unfinished novel in *Waiting for an Angel*, Chirman claims, “The novel is a success story of an act of defiance and the struggle to create truth in a dystopia” (65). In other words, although *Lomba* does not complete his novel, his writing still will have an impact on society due to its defiance of the ruling regime. About *Mamo*’s history article in *Measuring Time*, Chirman writes, “[Mamo] proves the simple idea that what makes the history of a people is its people and not the geography” (67). This relates to the bond between society, history, and writing that Chirman mentioned earlier in his article. Yet, Chirman’s argument hinges on the successful cooperation between the writer and society. It implies that, perhaps, when one side fails, the partnership also fails. This missing link, then, may explain why a closer analysis of Habila’s novels reveals a different picture of the role of the writer than Chirman claims.

3.8 Writing and the Role of the Writer According to Habila

Up to this point, this thesis has considered writing and the role of the writer according to different literary scholars who each use Habila's novels as evidence for their claims. In this section, however, Habila's own comments outside of his published, fictional works will be discussed. Although answers to interview questions do not necessarily translate directly to realities within fictional works, they do offer some insight into the intentions of the author. They also reveal a personal stance on this topic, apart from the way it is handled by characters that an author creates. For this reason, Habila's remarks on the function of writing and the writer in Nigeria, particularly those in the large number of published interviews from around the time that Habila won the Caine Prize as well as his introduction to *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* and a keynote lecture he presented at the Writer's Unlimited Literature Festival will be analyzed here.

Habila explains in his talks with different periodicals that he always felt drawn to writing and creates characters which also share this tendency. Habila says that he put an extra amount of effort into finishing *Waiting for an Angel* because he wanted to begin his writing career: "I was broke the whole time. But I knew that the book was the only way for me to kick-start my career as a writer. I managed to finish writing without cracking from the sheer loneliness and mental pressure" (Page). Yet, even when writing became difficult, Habila remained committed to it. When asked if he felt that he would always become a writer, Habila responds, "yes. I was always going to be a writer, all my life. I wrote two novels before I turned twenty. I was influenced quite early by stories and books, and later my professors at university. I never really considered being any other thing than a writer" (Sanusi). Habila's commitment to earning a living as a writer, in turn, influenced the way that he looked at the world: "I

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guess I always saw the world in terms of stories, with beginnings and middles and ends, with lots of twists and conflicts— and even, occasionally, with happy endings” (Sanusi). Even after winning the Caine Prize and the Commonwealth Prize, he still dedicates himself to writing. In response to a question about his plans for the future, Habila says, “all I can do is write more books and hope for the best” (Cowley). Habila admits that he instilled his devotion to writing in some of his characters. In reference to *Lomba*, Habila comments, “I think most first novels tend to draw a lot from the writer’s experiences; you have not learned to distance yourself yet. So I created a character who is a journalist like me, and an aspiring writer like me— young like me, because it would be easy for me to understand his psyche” (Bures). Thus, the important presence of writing and the writer in Habila’s novels, Habila concedes in his interviews, originally sprung from a connection to his own life. Yet, this fact does not fully explain the role of writing and the writer that Habila expands upon in further interviews.

By featuring writing and the writer, Habila argues that he is able to comment upon the political and economic situation in Nigeria from an advantaged standpoint. Habila also is able to exercise his new freedom after the end of the Abacha years. He explains, “that is the good thing that has happened with the coming of democracy. People can actually write about what they want to write. They can actually criticize the government, they can say what is wrong with the government. They can express themselves” (Bures). When Habila refers to “people” gaining the right to freedom of speech, he includes himself as well. Although the situation for writers in Nigeria has improved perhaps in relation to what Nigerian writers can write about, they still struggle financially. Habila comments that writing, for the Nigerian writer, must remain a personal pleasure: “So writing becomes something you do just for you, just for the sake of your ego, or because you want to be a writer, or whatever reason. But it is not an economic activity” (Bures). Because writers in Nige-

ria still face limitations on the number of books they can have published and where or through what publisher their books can be published, politics comes up in their writing as well. Habila sees this as simply part of literature: “you can define literature as mainly political” (Bures). Furthermore, Habila states, “I can’t avoid the political background creeping into the story and sometimes dominating the story. To do anything else would be lying, escaping reality. And if it happens to inform people of political situations, then it is all good” (Zerza 44). Adding political confrontations to his novels allows Habila to indirectly comment on the current political atmosphere in Nigeria. Yet, Habila does not only remark indirectly. He goes as far as to state outright that he believes that the Nigerian government must change things from the bottom up: “I think the Nigerian government has to get its act together on the ground as well” (Rangarajan).

Habila’s directness about the necessity for change in Nigeria implies a continuity with history, yet, Habila states exactly the opposite. He feels that Nigerian writing and the Nigerian writer must distance themselves from the past and instead focus on bringing about change for the future. About the first and second generation of Nigerian writers, Habila says, “there is a class of African writers who would like to think that our history was perfect until colonial times came, and then everything fell apart. No it has always been like that” (Niemi). More openly, Habila accuses the writers that came before him of idealizing the time prior to colonization. Habila says, earlier Nigerian writers “made the way for us, the younger generation to follow. But it doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to continue writing in the same tradition that they wrote in. . . . Times have changed. We didn’t grow up in villages, like they grew up. We didn’t listen to the same stories they listened to by moonlight” (Bures). Yet, Habila also resents the unbalanced amount of scholarly attention paid to the first generation of Nigerian authors: “I often attend lectures and conferences where some distinguished speaker will give a talk on African

3.8. Writing and the Role of the Writer According to Habila

literature that, to my disappointment, if not surprise, begins and ends with *Things Fall Apart* as if nothing has been written since 1958” (*The Granta* vii). Even if Habila shared a history with members of the first and second generations of Nigerian writers, he still finds fault in their preoccupation with the past. Instead, Habila places emphasis on the present: “I like to contribute to the discussion that is going on at the moment. And I think writers have a legitimate duty to do that and not just wait and write some philosophical text about it” (Niemi). Even more directly, in reference to Chinua Achebe specifically, Habila states, “There are things to write about that are not just Africans going about naked and all that shit. Where everybody is speaking in proverbs. It doesn’t happen. It’s just not there anymore. So we just have to write about what’s happening now” (Bures). Habila insists upon keeping his writing connected with the present because he also sees a necessity for writing to reflect reality.

Writing, according to Habila, should capture reality in order for it to bring about positive change. Habila feels that of all types of writing the novel has the most potential for improving society for the individual. Habila admits that journalism alone cannot solve all of Nigeria’s problems. About Zaq and Rufus in *Oil on Water*, Habila says, “I am not suggesting that they can’t change things. But I place these characters in the context of witness literature. They are there to witness and document; that is their primary role...journalists by themselves cannot bring about change” (Rangarajan). Habila, furthermore, articulates a key distinction between journalism and writing literature: “I don’t want to sound like if I intended the book to be a pamphlet, like if I was into journalism. No, I was writing literature. But literature is also a legitimate tool of resistance, of commenting on injustice” (Niemi). By literature, Habila refers to fiction: “The story of Africa, from independence to the present, is best told not in its history books and other officially constructed documents, but in its novels, short stories, poems, and other artefacts” (*The*

Granta xiv). More specifically, one type of fiction, the novel, will reach future generations. Habila argues that while the writings produced by reporters will be quickly forgotten, novels last much longer: “You have journalists; you have columnists. But what will last is the novel. It’s going to be there for hundreds of years. It’s going to be a document that will reach our children” (Bures). Although Habila uses the plural here, and implies that the novel could affect larger groups of people, he only foresees this possible improvement in the future tense. For the present, only the individual can benefit. Habila says, “As long as the nation continues to fail the individual by denying him the most basic freedom and civil rights, so long will the writer continue to walk away from the nation, to focus his attention on the individual” (Rangarajan). This statement explicitly contradicts the arguments of critics which see Habila carrying on the tradition of prior Nigerian writers who addressed their writing to the community. Habila, contrary to these claims, admits that due to the political atmosphere in Nigeria presently he must speak to one person at a time.

Habila further clarifies the need to write to the individual in his keynote lecture “Literature as a Way of Seeing.” Habila identifies the connection between capturing the truth and the writer as the writer’s most important distinguishing characteristic and truth itself as a fundamental part of fiction. Habila asks, “How can literature act to increase our vision, to enlarge our sympathies? And this is where I want to make a link between literature and truth: truth as a concept has always existed side by side with fiction” (“Literature”). The writer, Habila argues, must capture the truth of his or her experiences. He or she has no choice but to record events that happen to him or her: “The true writer cannot forget. The true writer in us will be haunted by that image until he or she writes about it” (“Literature”). Here, Habila argues that a writer has the necessity to write about the things that he or she sees. Yet, Habila emphasizes that a writer does things alone. He explains, “whatever decision

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you make, to stay or to leave, you are going to make as an individual” (“Literature”). The writer must remain separate from those around him or her in order to be able to capture the truth in his or her writing. Habila argues that writers strive to put the human condition in print and this goal makes him or her inherently separate from the rest of society:

The writer...is the ultimate loner and outsider. He can only exemplify the truth he sees by bucking against trend, against tradition and accepted ways of thinking...In order not to compromise himself he must reject all notions of belonging, he must make his home only in his writing, he must adopt an attitude of transcendental homelessness. (“Literature”)

In this statement, Habila claims that a writer’s lack of belonging results from his or her commitment to writing down the realities of the present world.

On the other hand, the writer also remains an individual because of his or her connection with politics and especially turbulent political situations. In the previously cited quote, Habila implies that the writer remains a loner because he or she fights back against the currently accepted status quo. The struggle between the writer and the nation rests at the heart of his or her distance from society. Habila asserts, “Most nations have no place for the individual voice, everything is subsumed under the story of the nation, and that is why the writer, unless he writes in praise of the nation, will always be viewed with suspicion, even hostility. And that is why the writer, the artist, will always be at war with society” (“Literature”). Additionally, Habila asks whether the nation or the individual has more value. He argues that the individual should have more worth because a nation is comprised of individuals, just as a novel is made up of individual characters: “[A]s a writer I cast my lot with the individual, for how can I help or change the nation if I cannot even see my fellow man? As a writer I work with character [sic], one at a time” (“Literature”). Habila also asserts that the nation deserves some of the blame for the shift of focus from society as a whole to separate members of society. Habila says, “as long as the nation continues to fail the individual, to deny

him even the most basic of civil rights and freedoms, so long will the writer continue to walk away from the nation, to focus his attention on the individual” (“Literature”). The writer, Habila claims, focuses his or her attention not only on the individual as a reader, but as a character within his or her writing as well: “In our globalized world, the writer now prefers to write about the individual who, tired of not being seen or heard or respected, simply packs his bag and crosses into the next country where he can live more freely... before you can be a writer for a group or a nation, you first have to be a writer for the individual” (“Literature”). Like Habila’s previous arguments about the role of the writer, this argument is informed by the current political and social environment in Nigeria. Because of the failure of the current government, the writer must abandon the group for the individual.

Habila’s statements in interviews, the introduction to *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* and his keynote lecture at the Writers Unlimited Festival contradict most arguments about his works. While theorists argue that Habila carries on the tradition of first and second generation Nigerian writers, Habila himself states that he breaks from the past in order to ground himself firmly in current times. Akingbe and Habila both emphasize the bond between writing and the truth, but Akingbe sees a social function to this goal that Habila does not. McCain asserts that Habila’s writing captures the society’s hopes and dreams for the future, yet Habila sees the future only through the eyes of individual members of society. Edoro’s arguments align most closely with those of Habila, however she also highlights the importance of society for the writer in Habila’s works and argues that writing serves society as a tool for bringing about change. Habila’s novels tell a different story. The different roles that writers in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water* have will be discussed in the following chapter, beginning with the writer as historian and Lomba from *Measuring Time*.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Habila's Novels

This chapter presents the role of writing and the writer as represented in Habila's novels solely. It relies uniquely on the texts of *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water* to delineate Habila's arguments about the function of writing and the writer within Nigerian society. It emphasizes the already-mentioned focus of Habila on the individual writer composing his or her works with an individual reader in mind. In this way, it supplements the comments explored in the previous chapter from scholarly works about Habila in addition to Habila's interviews and anthology introduction while also presenting a viewpoint in contradiction to most current texts about Habila.

4.1 The Writer as Historian

Mamo seems to stumble into writing history. Through a suggestion by Zara and later a forceful request by the Waziri, Mamo begins his career as a transcriber of history. Yet, even though this career may have chosen him rather than the other way around, Mamo feels strongly about the way that history should be approached by the writer and the distinct function of the writer as a historian. In his teaching of history, Mamo emphasizes the link between history and looking towards the future. As an answer to the question, "What is history?" a student of Mamo's says, "It is the story of the past" (Habila,

Measuring 95). Mamo adds to that comment, “Not entirely true, it is also about the future” (Habila, *Measuring* 95). Mamo implies that the events of the past have an effect of events in the future. The past shapes the present. The person that captures the past, however, has importance. Mamo comments upon the difference between Nigerian history written by a Nigerian and Nigerian history written by a Westerner. He feels compelled to write a response to Reverend Drinkwater’s *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti* because, as he puts it: “For one, [Drinkwater] was a missionary, and for another, he was a foreigner” (Habila, *Measuring* 171). After disagreeing with the way that Keti’s past is handled by Reverend Drinkwater in his book, Mamo decides to write an article in response. Zara encourages him by saying, “you could write about our history, about misrepresentations by foreign historians, using this book as your example” (Habila, *Measuring* 175). Zara uses “our” in an interesting way here. She implies that, although Drinkwater lived in Keti, because he spent his earlier years in the United States, he is not as qualified to write Keti’s history as Mamo, who has lived there his entire life. The foreigner writes from a foreign perspective, and that does not always remain true to the local perspective. The response from the *Empire Review* to Mamo’s review of *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti* provides a good example of this rift. They inform Mamo that “the subject does not suit our particular demand at the moment. However, if you have other pieces that address such issues as the AIDS scourge, or genital circumcision, or other typical African experiences in a challenging or progressive way, we’d like to take a look at them” (Habila, *Measuring* 179). The British press already has an idea of what it expects from an account of Africa, and place more importance on that expectation than on accuracy.

In his writing of history, Mamo believes that history should contain glimpses into the lives of individuals. Mamo “personally thought that most historians had now become too forensic, more scientific than the scientists,

which was sad” (Habila, *Measuring* 179). Rather than approaching history from a distance, Mamo feels that history must take on a personal connection to the persons that it describes. He responds to Professor Batanda’s letter and defines what he feels history should be: “a true history is one that looks at the lives of individuals, ordinary people who toil and dream and suffer, who bear the brunt of whatever vicissitude time inflicts on the nation. He said if a historian could capture these ordinary lives, including their reflections of their own family’s past, then he might come close to writing a true ‘biographical history’” (Habila, *Measuring* 180). Mamo repeats this sentiment when he tells Zara: “That’s what history really is, people and their lives, no matter how we try to manipulate it. It’s the story of real people with real weaknesses and strengths” (Habila, *Measuring* 225). Furthermore, Mamo mentions what he believes to be the flaw with most history writing– that it forgets about the people of a nation and instead places emphasis on the nation (Habila, *Measuring* 180). Here, Mamo reveals the consistent link between writing and the writer and individuals. Habila argues that the individual should be the focus of history writing, rather than the nation as a whole. He mentions this again in relation to his biography of the Mai: “What he wanted was to write the story of ordinary people, farmers, workers, housewives, and through their stories to arrive at a single overarching story” (Habila, *Measuring* 195). Similarly, Mamo argues that history should not privilege rulers. He argues that “even if we want to write about the founding fathers we shouldn’t privilege them, we should place them on a par with other ordinary folks” (Habila, *Measuring* 225). Professor Batang, in his response to Mamo, seconds this opinion. He reminds Mamo that the historian “must be humble, and his only interest will be to shine a light on the past for the future” (Habila, *Measuring* 185). Additionally, Professor Batang writes, “History should neither praise nor condemn as that will amount to bias, and isn’t that the very thing we criticize in the colonial histories? History only states what is, or what was, in

the way it was, and by this I mean both chronologically and factually" (Habila, *Measuring* 186).

4.2 The Writer as Activist

Writing and politics go inextricably together in Habila's works. When Lomba explains to his future editor, James, that he writes novels and is looking for a publisher, James responds, "What I need are articles and reports, not a novel. . . I think you will do justice to almost any subject you care to write on. Tell me, have you ever thought of writing on politics?" (Habila, *Waiting* 108). Those who write on politics, naturally come to also support activism. James informs Lomba, "every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another to form a sentence, there'll be revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it" (Habila, *Waiting* 196). Even those that deal with politics as educators eventually arrive at activism. The narrator says about Mamo: "He wanted to ask questions, not really to teach" (Habila, *Measuring* 105). Learning about the injustices brought about by the current government causes Mamo to desire to challenge the present situation.

In particular, the government's closure of the school in Keti brings Uncle Iliya to letter writing. He hopes to save the school from permanent closure and for that reason he "had written endless letters to the commissioner of education and then to the deputy governor and after that to the governor, but not one of them had replied" (Habila, *Measuring* 143). In his letters, Uncle Iliya gives "details about the idea between the KCS, and how important the school was to the students, and the need for keeping the education sector an open one where both the private and the public schools could function" (Habila, *Measuring* 143). Yet, Uncle Iliya receives no response because he depends on a group for support. He needs the government, the institution, to decide to reinstate the school. In the final chapter of *Measuring Time*, the narrator explains that

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“Iliya still sent letters to the Ministry of Education asking for the school to be reopened; still he received no replies” (Habila, *Measuring* 382). The rigging of the local elections in Ketu also brings Mamo to letter writing in protest. He pens a letter to the Ketu Police Command, denouncing Asabar and his gang (Habila, *Measuring* 205). Yet, just as with Uncle Iliya, Mamo’s attempt at activism does not improve the situation. Instead, “After he had alerted the police with his letter. . . they had followed [Asabar] as he left the house with his friends and then they had ambushed him before he got to the polling station. Two of the youth wing members were killed by the police, a policeman died on the way to the hospital, and Asabar took a bullet in the back” (Habila, *Measuring* 208). Mamo does not achieve the results that he had hoped for. In both cases— with Uncle Iliya and Mamo— activism through writing does not bring about change.

4.3 The Writer as Journalist

The journalist falls in between the historian and the activist. He or she fits into the description of historian because he or she only captures events after they have already occurred. Although journalism may strive to comment on current events, inevitably, the journalist serves the same function as the historian— documenting affairs after they have already begun and sometimes also already concluded. The journalist, additionally, aims to present only the truth. Habila draws a distinction between the foreign journalist and the Nigerian journalist. In *Measuring Time*, LaMamo meets French journalist Charles in Liberia. He overhears Charles arguing with the professor about Charles’ writing. The professor asks Charles about the books that he is composing about his time in Africa, and when Charles appears confused adds: “About how you came to Africa to save the natives from themselves, about your heroism in the face of fire, about being kidnapped. . . you’ll have a bestseller on your hands. Isn’t that why you came?” (Habila, *Measuring* 162). The professor accuses Charles,

the European, of using journalism for his personal gain. He also retorts: "But it is all about profit, my dear...Just write your book, make your money, give lectures about your time in Africa, because if you don't many others will" (Habila, *Measuring* 162-163). Journalism serves not to benefit the society that it captures, but the individual that does the writing. The professor recognizes the possibility that Charles will capitalize on the suffering that he witnesses, and for that reason, speaks with him forcefully. Here, a link between the writing by Charles and by Reverend Drinkwater is implied. Still, regardless of whether foreign or not, the journalist attempts to report only the truth. The Professor tells Rufus, "That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth...Write only the truth...the truth, remember that" (Habila, *Oil* 209-210). Zaq also implies that the journalist should simply witness events and then capture the facts about what happened. He tells Rufus: "We'll observe, and then we'll write about it when we can...That's how history is made, and it's our job to witness it" (Habila, *Oil* 60). Additionally, Zaq tells Rufus, "If you're patient, you'll see those moments too, and you'll write about them" (Habila, *Oil* 61). On top of that, he tells Rufus directly, "We want to report the truth" (Habila, *Oil* 75). Later, he says again, "Our job is to find out the truth" (Habila, *Oil* 143). Because the journalist shares this goal of transcribing events as they actually happened, he or she can be accepted as part historian.

Yet, the journalist can also be considered an activist due to his or her writing's nature of attempting to modify troubling situations. Zaq's comment about the job of the reporter being to find out the truth implies this fact. The Major accuses Rufus and Zaq of being too idealistic. He tells them, "You journalists, with your fancy ideas about human rights and justice...all nonsense" (Habila, *Oil* 97). Although the Major means to insult Zaq and Rufus, he implies that they have a desire to bring about a fairer society. Their writing has a drive towards change. Beke calls this "[c]rusading kind of stuff, but always from the inside, intimate" (Habila, *Oil* 124). The Professor recognizes this,

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and for that reason, commands Rufus to report on his group's actions. The Professor tells him, "You reporters, you are always clever with words— me, I am a soldier, I know how to fight, and I will never stop fighting till I achieve my goal. Write that when you get back" (Habila, *Oil* 208). While the Professor fights with force, Rufus and other writers fight with their words. By writing about the actions of the Professor and his band and telling people that they are responsible, as the Professor requests, Rufus has a hand in the change that the Professor desires— less pollution as a result of oil drilling (Habila, *Oil* 208). Rufus chooses journalism for this exact reason. He explains, "My ultimate ambition was of course to become like Zaq someday: to be respected all over the country for my strong liberal views, and to write editorials that would be read with awe" (Habila, *Oil* 23). Rufus wants his writing to have power, just as Zaq's does. Zaq's writing, for instance, brings James Floode to trust him: "it was his idea that we come to you [Zaq] and ask you to go with a few other journalists to confirm that his wife is still alive" (Habila, *Oil* 29). Thus, Zaq serves as a tool for James, and the kidnappers use him in the same way: "The kidnappers, eager for publicity, would usually invite a select team of reporters to their hideout to confirm that the hostages were alive and unharmed, after which they would make long speeches about the environment and their reasons for taking up arms against the government" (Habila, *Oil* 49). In both cases, the journalist provides publicity for the causes that both James and the rebels find important. For this reason, also, Zaq and Rufus place so much emphasis on headlines (Habila, *Oil* 147).

The journalist, however, most likely brings about change in the next generation, rather than the current one. When Rufus reminisces on his role and a writer and a journalist, he thinks about the impact that he will have on future readers of his works. He muses on the atrocities that he sees the Sergeant commit:

my job was to observe and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity. I witnessed the stoic and anticipatory posture of

the kneeling men. I witnessed the brutal anointing in silence, smelled the reek of petrol hanging in the air, pungent, acrid, and I wondered how the men could stand it. Already I felt sick and dizzy from the fumes. I had never liked the smell— it brought up memories in me, memories I would rather have kept down. (Habila, *Oil* 55).

The memories that a journalist has provide his or her fuel to write about the present and to facilitate change in the future. Rufus predicts that the memory of seeing Michael covered in petroleum would force him to write about it: “I promised myself that if I got out of here I’d write about this, every detail, every oil trickle, every howl of pain” (Habila, *Oil* 57). Because the event touched him personally, Rufus will desire to write about it. As Zaq puts it, “the best stories are the ones that we write with tears in our eyes, the ones whose stings we feel personally” (Habila, *Oil* 135). Rufus mentions the connection between writing and posterity in a conversation with Zaq about a lecture that Zaq gave at the journalism school. Rufus tells him, “you talked about journalists as conservationists... that we scribble for posterity... and you said that most of what we write may be ephemeral, a note here about a car accident, a column there about a market fire, a suicide, a divorce, yet once in a while, maybe once in a lifetime, comes a transcendental moment” (Habila, *Oil* 73). This transcendental moment contains the potential for writing a story that will impact its reader— “a great story only the true journalist can do justice to” (Habila, *Oil* 73). The writing of the journalist may make a difference, but only after enough time has passed. They scribble for posterity— for the next generation— not to forget about mistakes that have already been made.

4.4 The Writer as Educator

The writer who teaches students offers hope for a better future. This makes the role that the writer that works as a teacher important. As the commissioner for education puts it: “Our children are our future, we can’t take chances

with our future” (Habila, *Measuring* 197). Lomba idolizes his university professor, Dr. Kareem. The narrator describes how Lomba takes extreme pride in discussing writing with his teacher: “[Lomba] could spend hours there discussing his poetry with the old lecturer, and at that period in his life there was nothing Lomba preferred than to have his poems discussed and argued; it gave him some kind of vague hope, a sense of place in the larger scheme of things” (Habila, *Waiting* 80). The writer as educator provides direction for the next generation, including in their writing. Mamo, even before he begins working as a teacher at Uncle Iliya’s school, teaches LaMamo and his cousin Asabar: “He brought magazines from his father’s collection, and Mamo would read out to the other two the more interesting essays and stories, skipping the more difficult English words, about distant cities and famous people” (Habila, *Measuring* 26). Likewise, when Mamo falls ill with one of his “spells,” LaMamo teaches him. The narrator explains that “At such times, he’d make a conscious effort to entertain his brother in turn and he’d read aloud from whatever book was at hand, Wilbur Smith adventure novels mostly, till his head began to ache” (Habila, *Measuring* 36). Although in these two instances, education seems to serve only to improve the present moment, Habila implies a clear link between education and an improved future. LaMamo also recognizes the importance of education and African leaders. He writes in his letter to Mamo, “Our teachers tell us how important it is to get education if we are to become future African leaders” (Habila, *Measuring* 80). This education includes diverse subjects, including history. As the narrator comments, “Uncle Iliya had only recently added history to the syllabus because of his belief in what he called ‘comprehensive education’” (Habila, *Measuring* 95). Thus the writer that educates and the writer that deals with history, such as Mamo, share this topic. When Mamo’s review is published Zara comments that it “will show [the government] the caliber of teachers that we have here, and if they are smart they will see how important education is to our village” (Habila,

Measuring 190). Writing, in this case, encourages recognition of education.

Education is important for the future of Africa, according to Habila's novels, because it encourages you individuals to question the status quo. In *Oil on Water*, Zaq encourages Rufus to first get an education before he begins his career: "Read all the important books. Educate yourself, then you'll see the world in a different way" (Habila, *Oil* 158). This adapted view of the world is a central part of the importance of education. When Mamo lectures his history students about the importance of receiving a quality education, he tells them, "The worst thing that you can do... is to ever accept anything at face value. Don't agree with what a man says because he has lived longer than you, or because he claims that it is our way, using history as evidence to back his claim... The youth must be encouraged to ask, why is it our way?" (Habila, *Measuring* 98). Here, again, history and education overlap. The writer that educates looks forward into the future, teaching members of the younger generation to challenge established norms. Mamo rationalizes his insistence that his students remain distrustful: "I am saying that when you examine the motive behind most customs and their champions today, you will see that they are rigged to serve the interest of some elite, some self-styled custodian of our culture" (Habila, *Measuring* 99). The individual, informed by history, can stand up to the privileged groups that use historically-established customs to their advantage. The writer that educates provides the option of creating new customs which can help individuals. Mamo attempts to encourage his students to remain skeptical. The narrator explains that Mamo, in his courses "found himself repeating the phrase from LaMamo's letter about 'future African leaders'" (Habila, *Measuring* 105). Education brings about change. Mamo complains that most of his students "were unable to pass the standard school certificate exams because the village schools were substandard, the teachers could barely read themselves, and so [they] always failed, ending up as village layabouts" (Habila, *Measuring* 104). For the student that manages to receive some sort

of education, and the teacher that is able to educate, education offers an alternative to this cycle. The individual that succeeds in this system manages to be able to find a different future. The narrator summarizes this phenomenon in this way– “the best way to quip oneself for this life-long fight was by getting an education” (Habila, *Measuring* 132).

4.5 The Writer as Prisoner

In the beginning of *Waiting for an Angel*, Lomba finds himself in prison. Although this occurs chronologically at the end of the sequence of events within the novel, the reader’s first encounters with Lomba happen with prison as the backdrop. For Lomba, writing offers a mental escape from the physical pain that he suffers while he is in an actual prison. It also gives Lomba a means of expressing himself. Lomba describes his diary as the place where he can say the things that he chooses: “Today I begin a diary, to say all the things I want to say to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself” (Habila, *Waiting* 3). Lomba emphasizes that he writes for himself. He puts it another way: “Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice...I write of my state in words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality” (Habila, *Waiting* 3). Lomba’s choice of genre reflects his need to express himself as well. Lomba chooses to write diary entries and poems, yet only his poems survive the raid of his cell. The prison superintendent informs Lomba: “Your papers...I read them. All. Poems. Letters. Poems, no problem. The letters, illegal. I burned them. Prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But poems are harmless. Love poems” (Habila, *Waiting* 15-16). Because the prison superintendent lacks formal education, he incorrectly identifies Lomba’s diary entries as letters. Unlike letters, Lomba’s writing has no intended reader but himself. Lomba writes, as he has already expressed, to give his mind a

chance to explore a space outside of prison for a short while.

When Lomba's love poems find a reader, however, Lomba finds actual escape from his confinement. The superintendent feels so grateful for the connection between Lomba's love poetry and the superintendent's girlfriend, Janice, accepting his marriage proposal that he sees to it that Lomba's name ends up on the list of political prisoners wrongly accused. At first, the superintendent commands Lomba to write for him. He says, "I promised my lady a poem. She is educated, you know. A teacher. You will write a poem for me. For my lady" (Habila, *Waiting* 17). Then, the superintendent simply steals Lomba's writing and passes it off as his own. He explains, "I saw one of your poems...yes, this one... I gave it to [Janice] yesterday when I took her out" (Habila, *Waiting* 17). In gratitude for the effectiveness of Lomba's poems, the superintendent grants Lomba one favor. He tells Lomba that he could "make life easy" for him (Habila, *Waiting* 18). Assuming that Lomba will request cigarettes or food, the superintendent is surprised to learn Lomba's wish: "I asked for paper and a pencil. And a book to read" (Habila, *Waiting* 18). This desire relates to Lomba's hope of expressing himself in a small way through his writing. In the poems that he writes for Janice, although he should direct them to her, Lomba continues to compose his works for himself alone. He wonders, "how could I tell [Janice] that the message wasn't really for her, or for anyone else? It was for myself, perhaps, written by me to my own soul" (Habila, *Waiting* 28). Regardless of Lomba's intentions, his writing leads to his possible release from imprisonment. Habila leaves this unclear, although he implies its likelihood. It seems probably because Janice informs her new fiancé that she wants him "to contact [Amnesty International]. Give them [Lomba's] name" (Habila, *Waiting* 31). At the conclusion of the chapter, the narrator adds, "somehow it is hard to imagine that Lomba died. A lot seems to point to the contrary" (Habila, *Waiting* 32). One may assume that Lomba's writing brings about his literal freedom. In that way, it serves his personal needs, not

only mental, but also physical.

Unfortunately, other types of incarceration exist for Lomba. Before Lomba lands in prison, however, his writing acts as a prison. Lomba's writer's block becomes extreme to the point that Lomba feels that he is wearing it as chains. His freedom becomes as limited as if he were behind bars. Lomba explains that beginning at age 23, he dedicates himself fully to composing his novel. About the experience, Lomba says, "For the past two years I had been locked in this room, in this tenement house, trying to write a novel" (Habila, *Waiting* 106). Lomba's choice of the word "locked" echoes the description of being secured in a prison cell. Similarly, he does not add an actor to that description, and does not imply that he locked himself inside of his room. More clearly, he compares the feeling of struggling to put pen to paper with being placed in chains:

The words and sentences, joined end to end, looked ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table. I felt a deep, almost fanatical loathing for them. Two years, and still no single sentence made sense to me. Standing by the window, staring at the manuscript, I felt, with epiphanic clarity, that if I sat down and picked up my pen and added a sentence more to this jumbled mass, I'd die. The uncompleted novel would grow hands of iron and strangle me to death. (Habila, *Waiting* 106)

Ironically, although successful writing offers Lomba an escape later in his lifetime, his inability to write acts as confinement. When Lomba cannot complete his novel, he suffers as much as when he is in prison.

Yet, even if Lomba found the inspiration and the motivation to finish his novel, Nigeria itself imprisons him. The restrictions of society hinder Lomba from realizing his full potential. Lomba explains that the pain from seeing his writing destroyed is unbearable. After campus security rifles through Lomba's hostel room, Lomba details, "I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through my very soul. All I could think of as I stood there, with the torn, mud-caked papers in my hands and around me was: I have been writing these stories

and poems for as long as I can remember now, these are my secret thoughts and dreams" (Habila, *Waiting* 72). Just as Lomba fears that he loses his identity while in prison, society also destroys his identity. The feelings of pain that Lomba experiences are compared with those during his torture in prison. Although free, Lomba still suffers at the hand of Nigerian society. Furthermore, insecurity about his privacy causes Lomba to voluntarily destroy some of his works. He narrates, "I gathered [my papers] in a pile on the grass and set fire to them. My eyes filled with tears as I watched the pages curl and blacken in the flames" (Habila, *Waiting* 74). Lomba sacrifices part of his identity in order to protect his writing. Conversely, the writing that Lomba wishes to promote struggles due to the lack of publishers in Nigeria. Lomba tells Kela, "Someone told me that even if I finished [my novel] no one would publish it. That is true. Here in this country our dreams are never realized; something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare" (Habila, *Waiting* 164). Lomba does not specify what "something" ruins dreams in Nigeria. James, however, argues that the complete absence of publishers in Nigeria makes writing impossible: "You won't find a publisher in this country because it'd be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read" (Habila, *Waiting* 192). Here, James implies governmental problems which he later directly states. Foremost is the poverty caused by lack of international support. James states, "And of course you know why paper is scarce and expensive— because of the economic sanctions placed on our country" (Habila, *Waiting* 192). Nigeria's conflict with other countries has only lead to more problems for the Nigerian people. Lomba appears caught in the worst of each situation. When he is free, he cannot find the inspiration or the means to write, although he can write for himself. When he is in prison, he does not have the option to write for himself, although he has the inspiration

and, through the superintendent's favor, the means.

Time in prison, as Lomba experiences, contradicts the romanticized vision offered by the writers that he meets at Emeka Davies' apartment. Dunta, who reads a poem in honor of "Akin and Ogaga and Dele Giwa and all brothers and sisters in the struggle" is described primarily through his connection with prison time (Habila, *Waiting* 213-214). The woman that sits next to Lomba tells him, "[Dunta] has given readings all over the world, and he has been arrested twice. He just got out of jail" (Habila, *Waiting* 214). The woman makes being in prison into a positive career move. Furthermore, she suggests this move to Lomba as a way to improve his reputation. She tells him, "You really must try and get arrested— that's the quickest way to make it as a poet. You'll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award" (Habila, *Waiting* 215). Although, here, Habila may be poking fun at himself in the wake of his distinction as the winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing, he also reveals the reality of attempting to succeed as a writer in Nigeria in the late 1990's. For those who do not choose exile, being thrown into jail becomes a distinct reality. The woman that Lomba converses with makes this option seem favorable, perhaps an optimistic response to a bleak outlook. Yet, Lomba's description of his time in prison reveals exactly the opposite. Imprisonment, whether literal or figuration, stunts creativity and only makes the role of the writer that much more difficult to carry out.

4.6 The Writer as Woman

Things do not end well for any woman who writes in Habila's novels. Perhaps because her writing provokes those around her, she comes to an unpleasant conclusion to her situation, and sometimes also her life. In *Waiting for an Angel*, Nancy, Auntie Rachael's niece, writes graffiti on the walls of the cook shop. Nancy's particular choice of quotation the morning that Brother visits the cook shop leads to a conflict. Kela narrates, "I stopped writing, waiting

to offer assistance if he was choking. He wasn't. He was reading the graffiti on the wall; Nancy had made it this morning with her inexhaustible supply of colored chalks" (Habila, *Waiting* 132). After taking in the phrase "Poor Man's Paradise" used as a description for the chop shop, Brother becomes irate. He demands to know who wrote those words. Kela describes how Brother "wasn't amused. His eyes had grown redder. A bearded customer sitting across the aisle turned, surprised by the sharp tone" (Habila, *Waiting* 132-133). Brother then displays his anger more openly by accusing Nancy of insulting him and the other patrons (Habila, *Waiting* 133). This confrontation culminates in Nancy overturning Brother's order of eba and okro on his head (*Waiting* 134). Nancy does not mean any offence by repeating quotations that she has learned as "a magpie for quotable lines" (Habila 132). Instead, filling the walls of Auntie Rachael's restaurant serves as her hobby. "She could spend hour on it: cleaning, correcting, re-writing. All sorts of things: proverbs, clichés, epigrams, even couplets," Kela explains (Habila, *Waiting* 132). Yet, perhaps because her tomboyish appearance and forceful way of dealing with customers, she loses Brother's business and suffers a change of luck as she later becomes pregnant and runs away to her boyfriend. Nancy's writing does not improve her situation.

Hagar, Joshua's lover, offers another instance of correlation between a woman's writing and an unfortunate end in Habila's novels. Hagar takes up writing letters to Joshua when they no longer meet for weekly private lessons. Although Hagar already lives a dangerous life earlier in *Waiting for an Angel*, shortly after Kela learns of her correspondence with Joshua, Hagar dies. Kela relates Joshua's admission that after he tutored her in English and literature, she went off to university and continued her relationship with him through her writing. Joshua says, "Oh, I got her notes, love poems. But what could I do? I was a teacher and she a student" (Habila, *Waiting* 147). Even though Joshua does not respond, Hagar continues writing to him. (Habila, *Waiting*

147). Hagar's writing could represent her interest in Joshua's lifestyle. Further evidence to support that writing functioned as a manifestation of Hagar's enthusiasm for becoming like Joshua is her decision to read the same subjects at university as Joshua—English and literature (Habila, *Waiting* 147). Hagar mimics Joshua's writing, particularly his writing about politics. When Kela bumps in Hagar after she has left school and become a prostitute, Hagar shows Kela Joshua's "book reviews, essays...longer essays on social and political issues" (Habila, *Waiting* 152). Hagar demonstrates, through her saving of clippings of Joshua's published works, that she places value on writing, and in particular, writing about politics. It could be that this interest expands to include participation in rallies, such as they rally at which Joshua announced the change of the name Morgan Street to Poverty Street. Because Hagar accompanies the crowd to this demonstration, she is hit by a car and later dies (Habila, *Waiting* 177). Hagar's writing leads to further problems for her, and, indirectly, her eventual death. Her connection to writing and one writer in particular, Joshua, does not improve her situation in the slightest.

Zara goes through many trials throughout *Measuring Time*, including her attempt to become a writer. She and Mamo originally bond over her desire to get notes from him on her writing. Zara tells Mamo, "I am also writing something, a story, but it is not easy. My father says writers are geniuses" (Habila, *Measuring* 42). Although Zara may have received the respect of her father, her writing does not bring improvement to her private life. She only allows Mamo to read her manuscript, even at age fourteen (Habila, *Measuring* 109). She writes letters as well, yet also only sends them to Mamo and LaMamo: "She promised to write when she returned to the city, and she did, a letter each on their fifteenth birthday" (Habila, *Measuring* 110). While she continues her correspondence with LaMamo, this one letter comprises her entire correspondence with Mamo. Writing to him does not improve their friendship. Instead, it makes him more jealous of LaMamo. It also causes

Mamo to compare Zara and Binta, the neighbor's daughter, who sent Mamo "letters, simple stupid letters over which LaMamo and [he] would laugh" (Habila, *Measuring* 125). Just before Zara dies, her doctor asks Mamo about the package Zara left behind for him. When Mamo informs the doctor that it was a novel, the doctor says, "I don't know if this is a good sign. . . The mind is reaching back into the past, into happier times to escape the present. What ails her is here and now, and she must deal with it on those terms" (Habila, *Measuring* 372-373). In a way, Zara's commitment to writing facilitates her death. Writing allows her to ignore her present problems, and thus completely disconnect herself from reality. This choice makes her grow sicker.

In each of these three cases— Nancy, Hagar, and Zara— the woman writer composes her works with only one intended reader. Although in this case the dedication is to a woman rather than the writer, Lomba similarly dedicates his poems to only one person. He says, "I'll dedicate my first book to you. 'To Alice, the Love of My Life'" (Habila, *Waiting* 91). Lomba reiterates this sentence when he meets Alice later. He tells her, "All of my poems are dedicated to you" (Habila, *Waiting* 99). When Mamo gets his hands on Zara's unfinished novel, he discovers that it contains messages intended specifically for him. Dr. Njengo asks Mamo whether the piece of writing contains "some secret message that only you might understand?" (Habila, *Measuring* 373). After reading the epigraph, Mamo realizes that Zara included a quote that the two of them had discussed privately. He comments that this quote "was the message" of Zara's writing. For this reason, it becomes clear that Zara also has one intended reader while composing her novel.

4.7 The Writer as Exile/Outcast

For the writer who does not wish to go to prison, exile in a country other than Nigeria becomes a viable option. This is the case for James Fiki, the editor of *The Dial* in *Waiting for an Angel*. James runs the headline "Abacha:

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The Stolen Billions,” which angers the government and leads to a warrant for his arrest (Habila, *Waiting* 199). James does not appear surprised by this development, as an anonymous caller had already informed him of the intention of those in power to burn down the offices of *The Dial*. James explains to Lomba that the caller “also advised me to carry my passport about— in case I have to get out in a hurry” (Habila, *Waiting* 201). Thus, both James and his source agree that the most favorable option after irritating the people in control is to seek asylum in another country. Lomba, on the other hand, had not considered this. He thinks, “Passport. Exile. Asylum. The association flashes through Lomba’s mind and he thinks, has it really come to that?” (Habila, *Measuring* 201). At the conclusion of the novel, however, it does come to just that. James advises Lomba as well to contemplate abandoning Nigeria. James commands, “Go to London, or America. You’d fare better than me, you are still young” (Habila, *Waiting* 217). For both of these writers, existence as a wanted individual does not seem to be an option. Exile in a European city or in the United States offers more possibilities for freedom than staying in one’s homeland. The other options— death or imprisonment— do not seem appealing. As Emeka Davies put it, although James or Lomba may die in Exile, they would die “not in chains. Here, even if you don’t die, you’ll be in chains” (Habila, *Waiting* 216). Although the opening chapter of *Waiting for an Angel* reveals that Lomba does not make it to exile before being captured, James’ fate remains unclear. He may choose exile in order to simply survive.

LaMamo, on the other hand, chooses exile in Liberia in the hope of returning to Nigeria as a hero. Differently than James or even Lomba, who might not ever be able to return to their home country, LaMamo expects to come back to his home having gained experience and recognition. LaMamo elects to live as an outcast, but to stay connected with his family through his letter-writing. Even Lamang appears eager to receive letters from his son. When Mamo informs Lamang that LaMamo “said he would write,” Lamang

responds by asking, “Write? Write? When?” (Habila, *Measuring* 69). Writing letters becomes an important way to keep in contact although far away. It serves a purpose both for LaMamo, the writer, and Mamo, the recipient of LaMamo’s writings. Commenting on the lack of correspondence from LaMamo, the narrator details that Mamo, “missed the letter even more now that he didn’t have the school library to ease his loneliness” (Habila, *Measuring* 79). When the promised letter arrives, it is “full of disconnected ideas and bad grammar, but it made perfect sense to Mamo as he eagerly ate up the lines with his eyes” (Habila, *Measuring* 79). The letter makes Mamo feel better in the moment in which he reads it and also when he re-reads it in the future. The narrator explains that Mamo safeguards LaMamo’s letter “in a book by his bed to read on the nights when he couldn’t go to sleep” (Habila, *Measuring* 81).

LaMamo’s epistles eventually lead to his return to Ketu, although brief. For Mamo, however, before LaMamo’s return, writing helps him to connect with his outcast father. When Lamang finds himself ousted from both the Victory Party and the New Victory Party, writing together with Mamo brings him some form of comfort. The narrator explains that “[t]he first time that they began talking was when his father brought out a pen and paper and asked him to write a letter for him. . . It became a routine, and they tentatively opened up to each other” (Habila, *Measuring* 216). For those who no longer belong to their respective groups, writing provides a way of connecting again. In this case, it brings Mamo and Lamang to understand each other for a short while.

4.8 The Writer as (Auto)Biographer

Biography appears as an organizing element in *Measuring Time*. Most chapters have a reference to the biography that Mamo completes after the final event in the novel’s narrative. The first chapter, for example, contains this mention: “Many years later, when he wrote his mother’s story in his book

4.8. The Writer as (Auto)Biographer

of biographies, *Lives and Times*, Mamo, the elder twin, tried to capture in words the night she died” (Habila, *Measuring* 17). More than that, however, biography contains other elements which Habila interweaves into discussions of the role of the writer. Joshua describes biography thus: “Biography is about the best read you can ever have. It has a bit of everything inside it: history, psychology, literature, and also a lot of silly opinion” (Habila, *Waiting* 124). Professor Batang compares history and biography. He explains that while history deals with facts, biography “deals with the human element, it gives us a freedom to ruminate, to be subjective, and so to philosophize, to examine character, and to condemn or to praise” (Habila, *Measuring* 186). Professor Batang compares biography with fiction. He accepts that the biographer or autobiographer selects the amount of truth that appears in his or her work. In other words, “it is more of an art than history” (Habila, *Measuring* 186). Reverend Drinkwater also recognized the multifaceted value of biography-writing: “As soon as [his converts] could read and write, the reverend would make them write their own biographies: about the ancestry, their myths, and of their desire to be washed white by the blood of Jesus” (Habila, *Waiting* 131). While Reverend Drinkwater used autobiography as an evangelizing tool, he also touches upon the importance of biography for making members of the community feel important. They recognize that their own personal histories have importance, and by writing them down, they preserve them.

Biography and autobiography serve the same purpose for Mamo. Mamo feels that biography should offer the chance of achieving fame. Thus, a biography of the Mai must also contain autobiographical elements in order to garner recognition for Mamo. Mamo hopes to use his work as the official scribe to catch some attention:

Mamo would weave himself unobtrusively into the book in the form of the foreword, in which he would leave detailed accounts of his investigative endeavor, nothing too obvious, just coded hints. Then upon reflection he decided that perhaps a foreword might be too attention-grabbing, too obvious; an after-

word might be better— more discrete but still doing the same job. (Habila, *Measuring* 256).

Thus writing presents Mamo with the opportunity to fulfill his childhood goal of being remembered. He uses his ability to write in order to finally achieve the fame that he and LaMamo dreamed about together. To do this, however, he must ignore the tendency of biography to completely hide the writer. Mamo thinks, “That was the peculiar trouble with biography more than other kinds of writing, it focused attention on the subject, and often the author was forgotten, cast aside, as if the book had written itself” (Habila, *Measuring* 256). Mamo never fulfills his goal. Just before giving up, he asks himself, “what of fame... what of immortality?” (Habila, *Measuring* 275). Still, he discovers that he cannot improve the future for anyone through writing himself into a biography— “he knew that was going to be impossible” (Habila, *Measuring* 287). Instead, Mamo writes the biography that becomes the organizing thread of *Measuring Time*. The narrator explains that “it’d be in fifteen to twenty chapters, and each chapter would cover the life of one individual. He’d talk with the people, go into their houses, into their hearts, to write about their secret desires and aspirations” (Habila, *Measuring* 358). By pushing forward individuals into the future, through capturing them in his biography, Mamo finds a different way to become famous— as the author of the work.

4.9 The Writer as Storyteller

The storyteller differs from the historian in that his or her works contain a larger proportion of fiction. While the historian should attempt to faithfully record events as closely to the truth as possible, the storyteller enjoys more artistic and creative freedom to manipulate information as he or she sees fit. In *Waiting for an Angel*, Joshua comments that to deal with the disheartening situation in Nigeria, exaggeration in storytelling becomes necessary: “Hyperbole is a legitimate device in storytelling. Most stories, in order to achieve

maximum effect, have to be exaggerated” (Habila, *Waiting* 129). Because embellishment allows the writer to cope with the unpleasant atmosphere in present-day Nigeria, it also goes hand in hand with optimism. The writer must stay positive, and his or her stories offer a way of doing so. Lomba tells Kela after they meet for the first time, “I thought I could cure all the world’s ills through my stories” (Habila, *Waiting* 164). Additionally, the writer offers hope for his or her readers. Joshua tells Lomba, “a feature article you wrote...two years ago— about our abject condition. It was a good piece, it gave us a lot of hope” (Habila, *Waiting* 190). The combination of Lomba’s positivity and overemphasis can be seen in this article that Joshua refers to, which was written about Morgan Street for *The Dial*. Lomba interweaves the truth of cars lining up for hours to get fuel with the invented image of soldiers carrying guns and insisting on bribes to move the line of cars along (Habila, *Waiting* 113). Yet, Lomba’s embellishments turn into predictions when his depiction of local women tearing down billboards to use as firewood comes true: “It was my writing acting itself out...I wished [James] were here to see reality mocking his words” (Habila, *Waiting* 113-114). Thus the storyteller occupies the space in between the historian and the fiction writer. He or she may choose to stay connected to reality or his or her stories may turn into reality anyways.

Just as Joshua argues that storytelling can provide hope, Mamo and LaMamo’s Auntie Marina uses storytelling to help them cope with their controlling father. Whereas Mamo would have fixated on the darkness connected with his mother’s death, Auntie Marina emphasizes the lighter side. The narrator explains, “In her retelling of the same events to the twins, Auntie Marina never dwelled too much on the unhappy aspects of the story; she had a light touch, skimming and flipping over the surface, always aiming for the folktale’s happy reversals of fortune and resolution” (Habila, *Measuring* 18). Here, Habila references the link between the storyteller and the folktale tradition in

Nigeria. The writer as storyteller carries on the custom of speaking community legends out loud. Yet, the modern storyteller fulfills a different role in that his or her stories become immortalized in print. They have the ability to live on long after the storyteller himself or herself can no longer transmit the tales orally. For this reason, Auntie Marina does not qualify as a writer and a storyteller, but simply as a storyteller.

Yet, besides using stories to soothe a difficult childhood, Auntie Marina also helps to keep Mamo alive through her tales. In this way, her storytelling connects with the writer. Her storytelling allows Mamo to survive to become a biographer, historian, and activist. Mamo explains that Auntie Marina, to him and his brother, “was a magician, a witch with words. She could conjure up mountains and undersea kingdoms with words. I stayed alive from day to day just to hear her next story. She was Scheherazade, I was the king, but she told stories to save my life, not hers” (Habila, *Measuring* 22). The connection between storytelling and Mamo’s imagination gives him the strength, at least mentally, to make it through his childhood. The narrator adds that “Mamo came to think that it was these stories that kept him alive. He imagined the stories insinuating themselves into his veins, flushing out the sickle-shaped, hemoglobin-deficient red cells that clogged the nodes in his veins and caused his joints to swell painfully” (Habila, *Measuring* 23). Furthermore, Mamo feels that the stories told by Auntie Marina not only allow him to keep living, but also make him stronger: “It was the stories and not the folic acid tablets that he swallowed daily, or the green vegetables and liver that were staples in the sickler’s diet, or the special care not to get bitten by mosquitos; it was his auntie’s stories slowly working their magic in his veins” (Habila, *Measuring* 23). Thus, although Auntie Marina does not act as a writer herself, she allows Mamo to write. Her fictional tales inspire him to write nonfiction in the future. For this reason, Auntie Marina does not qualify as a female writer. Still, she proves that storytelling and writing go hand in hand.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Collective action in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water* leads to more trouble for those involved. Contrary to when individuals assist other individuals, when groups attempt to cause change for the benefit of society, they only cause the chances of a successful resolution to a conflict to deteriorate. When Peter and Paul attempt to enter campus to visit Bola and Lomba, they find “the campus gate barred by the students” due to a demonstration (Habila, *Waiting* 56). Later, Bola argues: “The military has failed us” (Habila, *Waiting* 68). Students, as a group, as well as the military only make life more difficult for individuals like Bola and Lomba. In *Measuring Time*, LaMamo comments about the military, “it will take more than us [the military] to set Africa free” (Habila, *Measuring* 108). Uncle Iliya argues that the government in general only brings about more barriers for forward-thinking individuals. After learning that his school has officially been closed, he comments, “If you think the military were inefficient, well, you have seen nothing yet. In one year, no, six months, everyone will have forgotten there was once a school here. There will be only grass and lizards and goats in the classes and crumbling walls” (Habila, *Measuring* 198). Religion and church groups, likewise, regardless of denomination, also only bring trouble. The narrator describes the rioting in Keti thus: “But who cast the first stone— one of the jagged, fist-sized stones so plentiful on the top of the hill? No one knew,

but soon they were whizzing through the air and connecting with faces, arms, legs, and chests” (Habila, *Measuring* 329). Here, actual violence erupts, rather than simply more difficulties. Many people die as a result of this action, and completely forfeit their chance for an improved future.

Mamo’s transcription of the church drama group’s performance of the arrival of Keti’s first missionary, Reverend Nathan Drinkwater, offers perhaps the best example of a writer attempting to write for a large group and not finding success. Mamo attempts to assist his Aunt Marina’s friends by transcribing their lines rather than allowing them to continue reciting them from memory. Mamo does this particularly when he notices that the youngest member of the group, Abiyatu, has not been told what her lines were before her mentor left (Habila, *Measuring* 40). The narrator describes Mamo’s work to create a script: “The next day, he came with a notebook and wrote in it as he watched the women moving up and down the stage. By the end of the week, he had written down each character’s lines in the order in which they were delivered” (Habila, *Measuring* 40). Yet, when Mamo presents his finished work to the members of the drama group, he is met with confusion instead of the gratitude he expected. The narrator provides a sarcastic explanation for the women’s lack of appreciation using a reference to the Gospel of John: “Like all true Christians, they were in awe of ‘the word,’ the written word, because in the beginning was the word and nothing was made that was made but through the word” (Habila, *Measuring* 41). This explanation stands in sharp contrast, however, to a description of the women’s reactions. The narrator describes how these women “now faced with having to be word-perfect, had suddenly lost their confidence and went about in a wooden, self-conscious way, and although the audience still cheered and laughed. . . and shed tears. . . Mamo could see that the raw, unpremeditated vitality had gone out of the performance” (Habila, *Measuring* 41). When Mamo tries to interpret the needs of a group of fifteen, he only makes the situation more difficult. No individual member

of the group, not even Aunt Marina, who normally acts extremely kindly to Mamo, shows gratitude for Mamo's work. His writing transforms a previously joyous task into a source of stress. This transformation also fits more generally with whenever a writer in Habila's novels focuses his or her attention on society as a whole rather than individual members of society.

Yet, Habila leaves hope for the future of Nigeria. All three of his novels end on an unresolved note. The reader never learns whether Lomba does well after his release from prison, whether Mamo achieves fame after composing his history of Ketì, or whether Rufus and Isabel Floode escape from their predicament. Still, through his depiction of younger characters and more intelligent members of society, Habila leaves room for a brighter future. The second time that *The Coming*, Mamo's play, is performed, "the actors strictly followed the scripted dialogue, almost word for word" (Habila, *Measuring* 380). The new members of the drama club, better educated and better informed, can handle the change in tradition. The narrator explains: "Unlike the older generation, a lot of them had completed their primary and even secondary education. Some of them were secretaries in the local government, some teachers in the primary school" (Habila, *Measuring* 378). This scene demonstrates that problems, such as the inability to follow a scripted play, can be solved in the future. Similarly, when the writer turns his or her attention to an individual, his or her writing is received positively. Janice assists Lomba in escaping prison. Mamo understands Zara's final message. Zaq's works encourage Rufus to continue writing and to pursue a career as a journalist. The writer and his or her writing can make a positive influence, if only one person at a time. Yet how exactly the writer should go about this remains unexplored. Habila suggests ways of using writing to capture the past, to bring about hope and encouragement, but not how to change society as a whole.

Perhaps this unresolved issue reveals a further problem to be explored in the future, particularly including an analysis of Habila's next novel, tentatively

titled “Travellers” (“Amazon”). For now, however, this thesis has presented a current approach to the question of the role of writing and the writer for one member of the third generation of Nigerian writers. It has looked at several topics throughout its discussion of this theme. In the second chapter, it discussed working definitions for four terms that have been used throughout the rest of the thesis. These terms— third generation, Nigerian, and writer— connect with larger issues related to writing and the publishing industry in Nigerian as well as politics and Nigerian history. This chapter also considered the specific case of Habila, his background, his works, and the general themes which appear in his writing. The third chapter provided an overview of all current scholarly works which focus on Helon Habila. This not only filled a gap in scholarship presently available, but also revealed the consistent link between other topics and the question of the role of the writer. As scholars discussed topics like environmental exploitation, coming-of-age, international relations, the city, activism, and writing in general, they also brought up Habila’s focus on the writer in his three novels. The final chapter of this thesis took up this topic in depth. It discussed the many roles that the writer fulfills in *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water*. It presented Habila’s depiction of the writer’s purpose both in present society and in the future. Most importantly, it argued that Habila unequivocally encourages individual writers writing with an individual reader in mind. Regardless of whether the writer writes as a historian, an activist, a journalist, an educator, a prisoner, a woman, an exile or an outcast, a biographer or an autobiographer, or a storyteller, his or her role plays out one person at a time. Yet how, exactly, this change must be brought about for the entire community remains unanswered. Individuals must someday achieve adaptations at a societal level, although a discussion of how may be left for another work.

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Appendix

Curriculum Vitae

Education

University of Vienna , Vienna, Austria <i>Master of Arts Programme</i> , Anglophone Literatures and Cultures	Oct 2012–Sept 2014
Fundación José Ortega y Gasset , Toledo, Spain <i>Study Abroad Program</i> , GPA 3.87/4.00	Sept–Dec 2010
University of Notre Dame , Notre Dame, Indiana, USA <i>Bachelor of Arts</i> , English and Spanish, GPA 3.62/4.00	Aug 2008–May 2012

Employment Experience

Kellogg Institute for International Studies , student worker <i>University of Notre Dame</i> , Notre Dame, Indiana, USA	Sept 2011–May 2012
Robinson Community Learning Center , front desk employee South Bend, Indiana, USA	Aug 2008–May 2010

Volunteer Experience

Peace Corps Liberia , trainee <i>Lango Lippaye Secondary School</i> , Kakata, Liberia	Jun–Jul 2012
Adelante América , tutor <i>La Casa de Amistad</i> , South Bend, Indiana, USA	Sept 2011–Feb 2012
WorldTeach , volunteer <i>Comunidad Pauschiyacu</i> , Tena, Ecuador	Jun–Aug 2011
English as a Second Language classes , student assistant <i>International Student Services and Activities</i> , Notre Dame, Indiana, USA	Jan–May 2011
English classes , student aide <i>Escuela oficial de idiomas</i> , Toledo, Spain	Sept–Dec 2010
Jardín de infancia , student assistant <i>YMCA</i> , Toledo, Spain	Sept–Dec 2010
Appalachia Seminar , participant <i>Sacred Heart School</i> , Williamson, West Virginia, USA	Apr 2010

Appendix

Catholic Youth Camp , counselor <i>Diocese of Des Moines</i> , Panora, Iowa, USA	Jul 2009
Cultivating Community: Faith, Culture and Work Seminar , participant <i>Our Lady of Soledad Parish</i> , Coachella, California, USA	Apr 2009
Summer Service Learning Project and Urban Plunge , participant <i>Des Moines Catholic Worker Community</i> , Des Moines, Iowa, USA	Oct 2008–Oct 2009

Publications

The Canada Square Gazette , articles published	Dec 2012–Mar 2013
Connecting Home and School: Complexities, Concerns, and Considerations in Fostering Parent Involvement and Family Literacy , essay published	May 2010
Scholastic Magazine , articles published	Sept 2009–May 2010
Via Pacis , article published	Jul 2009
Fresh Writing , essay published	Mar 2009

Honors

Sigma Tau Delta , International English Honor Society	
Sigma Delta Pi , International Spanish Honor Society	
José Tito Siguenza Award for Service to Hispanic Youth	May 2012
Alliance for Catholic Education , Student Leadership Award	Oct 2011
Andrew J. McKenna Scholarship	2010, 2011
Eileen/Charles Arentowicz Scholarship	2010, 2011
J A & E E Neufeld Scholarship	2010, 2011
Marc & Chris Fischer Family Scholarship	2010, 2011
Indiana College Publication Awards , 3 rd place Best Entertainment Piece	Mar 2010
Summer Service Project Scholarship	2009
Daughters of the American Revolution Good Citizen Scholarship	Mar 2008

Languages

English , native
German , advanced Completed C2/2 level through Universität Wien
Spanish , advanced Completed C.1.3 level course through Cervantes Institute Vienna
Portuguese , basic

Abstract

Helon Habila's three novels place writing and the writer at the forefront. Taking this theme into account, this thesis asks what role writing and the writer, in their diverse forms, play both within Habila's works. To answer this question, this thesis approaches the topic from three directions. First, it addresses central controversies within postcolonial and postmodern studies. It offers working definitions for the terms "third generation," "Nigerian," and "writer" in relation to Habila and his contemporaries. Second, this thesis presents a literature review of current scholarship which focuses on Habila. It delineates the connection between the topic of writing and the writer and articles and Master's theses which focus on the themes of oil and the environment, childhood and the bildungsroman, the nation and the United States, Lagos, protest and the military, and words and writing style. It also reveals the present argument within several scholarly works that Habila continues the tradition of first-generation Nigerian writer of linking the writer with societal change. Finally, this thesis performs a close reading of *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time*, and *Oil on Water*. It argues, contrary to other scholars, that Habila presents a distinctly third generation Nigerian viewpoint— that the writer, in the existing political atmosphere in Nigeria, can no longer focus his or her attention on society as a whole. Instead, the writer and writing's role has to do with the individual. Habila offers a vision of change for Nigeria which is brought about by individuals and carried on by individuals in the future.

Kurzfassung

In seinen drei Romanen stellt Helon Habila das Schreiben und den Schriftsteller in den Vordergrund. Unter Einbeziehung dieses Themas untersucht diese Masterarbeit die Rolle, die das Schreiben und der Schriftsteller in ihren verschiedenen Formen in den Arbeiten Habilas einnehmen. Zu diesem Zweck wird das Thema von drei Blickwinkeln beleuchtet. Zuerst werden zentrale Kontroversen des Postkolonialismus und des Postmodernismus behandelt. Dazu werden Arbeitsdefinitionen der Begriffe „dritte Generation“, „nigerianisch“, und „Schriftsteller“ in Relation zu Habila und seinen Zeitgenossen gegeben. Weiters präsentiert diese Arbeit eine Literaturobwohl wertung gegenwärtiger Forschung über Habila. Diese skizziert die Verbindung des Leitmotivs des Schreibens und Schriftstellers mit Publikationen und Diplomarbeiten zu den Themen Öl und Umwelt, Kindheit und Bildungsroman, Nation und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, Lagos, Protest und Militär, sowie Ausdruck und Schreibstil. In diesem Zusammenhang wird außerdem die aktuelle Forschungsdiskussion über Habilas Verknüpfung des Schriftstellers mit gesellschaftlichem Wandel als Fortsetzung der Tradition nigerianischer Schriftsteller der ersten Generation behandelt. Zuletzt präsentiert diese Arbeit ein Close Reading von *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time* und *Oil on Water*. Entgegen anderer Lehrmeinungen kommt die Arbeit zu dem Schluss, dass Habila eindeutig eine Dritte-Generation-Sichtweise vertritt, nämlich, dass der Schriftsteller oder die Schriftstellerin in der bestehenden politischen Atmosphäre in Nigeria nicht länger sein oder ihr Augenmerk auf die Gesellschaft als Ganzes richten kann. Stattdessen steht die Rolle des Schriftsteller und des Schreibens in Zusammenhang mit dem Individuum. Habila bietet eine Vision für ein verändertes Nigeria an, die von Individuen herbeigeführt wird und von Individuen in der Zukunft fortgeführt wird.

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