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## Book Review: *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel: Quests for Meaningfulness*

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*The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel: Quests for Meaningfulness*  
Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba  
Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2021  
280 Pages; Price: £29.99 Hardback

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Holocaust is the quintessential template against which every episode of mass violence or atrocity is relativised. Anyaduba's *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel* begins with this premise, unravelling accounts in novels of genocide in postcolonial Africa that reproduce motifs from the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that attempts are now being made to reorient the *norm*-alising gaze beyond its ambit.<sup>2</sup>

For what it's worth, the narrative of genocide in Nigeria contains an allusion that just as Israel was a geographical solution to the Holocaust, so was the emergence of Biafra for the targeted Igbo.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the first published novel on the genocide in Nigeria contains a character (Lord Haw Haw, a civilian administrator for the enemy faction) closely resembling the World War II propagandist, William Joyce.<sup>4</sup> But tropes and symbols pegged to the Holocaust extend beyond scholarly work to instances of memorialisation: The Genocide Museum of Phnom Penh, once known as Tuol Sleng or S-21, was initially structured and organised by Mai Lam who based his aesthetic choices on Nazi concentration camps.<sup>5</sup> Anyaduba claims that representational practices drawn from the Holocaust make it seem like "a kind of Lacanian Master-Signifier" and this imposition is violent and irrational, borrowing the words of Slavoj Žižek.<sup>6</sup> The overall effect of this domination, or "asymmetrical encounter," is that it manipulates representations of African genocides so that essence and complexity are renegotiated and eventually distorted.

Anyaduba views Holocaust prototyping as having merits and faults. The Holocaust "provides those working with and on African genocides with a ready-made descriptive toolbox," making "African genocides visible globally" while it "has also in various ways overdetermined the explanatory and moral-evaluative frames through with African genocides

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<sup>1</sup> For example, D. M. Thomas's novel, *The White Hotel* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), a pornographic representation of the Holocaust, bears close resemblance to Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) with a similar setting in a hotel.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexander Laban Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US* (New York: NYU Press, 2021) where the Cambodian genocide (1975–1979) emerges as the yardstick to launch his discussion about the possibility of genocide in the US.

<sup>3</sup> Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba, *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> See Caitlin Brown and Chris Millington, "The Memory of the Cambodian Genocide: The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum," *History Compass* 13, no. 2 (2015), 31–39; Michael G. Vann, "Emotion and Ambiguity in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum," *The Asia Dialogue*, January 8, 2019, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/01/08/emotion-and-ambiguity-in-the-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum/>.

<sup>6</sup> Anyaduba, *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel*, 94.

have been conceived of and responded to in art as well as in the 'real' world."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, aligning the narrative of genocides in Africa to the Holocaust suggests a reductive exercise, whereby a complex history pre and post war is set aside for a "story of evil that is removed from the larger flow of history."<sup>8</sup>

Anyaduba's focus, promising an evaluation of *African* genocide literature, bears primarily on mass killings of the Igbo in Nigeria (1966–1970) and the Tutsi in Rwanda (1990–1994). Anyaduba justifies it. He refers to the wealth of literary work concerning atrocity events in these two countries and where "the word 'genocide' was mobilised for a range of political, socio-cultural, and legal purposes,"<sup>9</sup> having for a long while been blurred out in the catch-all phrase "civil war."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Rwandan experience of genocide now provides a blueprint within the African context for subsequent representations of mass violence and atrocity.<sup>11</sup> The main texts of Anyaduba's focus are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*<sup>12</sup> and Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*<sup>13</sup> in the context of Nigeria, and Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi, the Book of Bones*,<sup>14</sup> as well as Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*<sup>15</sup> for Rwanda. These choices, he says, were based on the abundance of critical attention they received and the quality of their representation of genocide.<sup>16</sup>

In Chapter 1, Anyaduba lays the groundwork to evaluate the connections (or the lack thereof) of postcolonial genocides in Africa and colonial rule, as many scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani have concluded that atrocities originate from the "politicisation of the social identities of Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa in Rwanda during the colonial times."<sup>17</sup> Anyaduba veers towards the opinion that genocide took place long before the arrival of the colonials so that identifying its origins in racism or colonial politics would be objectionable. Genocide in Africa is *not* a modern phenomenon. Anyaduba draws on a study of Raphael Lemkin's early ideas on labelling an episode of mass violence as genocide, distinguishing between killing targeted individuals, and them as a group.<sup>18</sup> A distinction between structural and intentional genocide is also underscored, with Anyaduba pointing out the difficulty in associating the latter to the African context.<sup>19</sup> The former, with its take on the effects of social organisations and ideologies, seems a better fit. Structuralists' admittance of intended as well as unintended causes validates the experience of genocide in Africa.<sup>20</sup>

In Chapter 2, Anyaduba deepens the schism between colonial violence and genocide, claiming that the former invigorated the African aspiration for independence, nationalism, and the nation-state; the latter drew people away.<sup>21</sup> More crucially, this chapter lays out the idea of entanglement where Anyaduba speaks of the Holocaust blueprint as having been moulded by more than the Holocaust experience itself. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* that challenges the "linear

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy* (London: Rex Collings, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Courtemanche, *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*.

<sup>16</sup> Anyaduba, *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 81.

trajectory of memorialisation,"<sup>22</sup> Anyaduba says that memories of the Holocaust were entangled with other atrocities, such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) against colonial France. By this, in line with the overarching idea of the book, it is suggested that the narrative of the Nigerian genocide possesses characteristics over and above the *entangled* template of the Holocaust. Moreover, it is highlighted that the Holocaust permeates the narrative of other genocides in both, direct and indirect, intended and unintended ways. Citing Rwandese Gilbert Gatore's *Le Passé devant Soi*,<sup>23</sup> Anyaduba points out that the author confessed documenting his experience of the civil war after reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*,<sup>24</sup> handed to him by his father on the eve of the war.<sup>25</sup>

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the tropes that Anyaduba singles out as pervasive in postcolonial genocide African literature; these being "a descent into hell, the portrayal of victims as objects of ritual sacrifice, and writing about genocide as duty to a moral imperative."<sup>26</sup> Chapter 5 lays out the fallacy in the gendered genocide novel of authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*)<sup>27</sup> and Buchi Emecheta (*Destination Biafra*)<sup>28</sup> where the focus of genocide, its instigators and victims, is subsumed by the feminist project. Anyaduba goes on to show how such novels "racialise masculinity,"<sup>29</sup> laying the blame of genocide on the hubristic masculinity of Igbo men, deflecting attention from the real culprits, the Nigerian military government,<sup>30</sup> a feat by all means ironical since the genocide in Nigeria was ethnically driven, and not based on class nor gender. From a scholarly perspective, as opposed to a creative and reader-driven one, the choice of centering the storyline along a romantic account also dilutes the significance of bringing the Nigerian genocide to the fore.

In Chapter 6, the charge of deflecting attention from genocide is also applied to Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, where this time violence is sexualised.<sup>31</sup> Issues of positionality arise as Anyaduba analyses whether a white man ought to write about the sexual life of a black woman. The chapter discusses the meaning of "pornography" in terms of the double-victimisation of genocide victims and survivors, since their pain and suffering are turned into commodities.<sup>32</sup> A close reading of Courtemanche's novel reveals the multifarious ways in which death, sex, pleasure, and violence are juxtaposed into what is best described as pornographic representations of genocide.

This study, fiercely loyal to the boundaries it initially marks out, also deserves to be commended for its references across a wealth of sources and disciplines beyond the subject of genocide studies.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Gatore, *Le Passé devant Soi (The Past Ahead: A Novel)*, trans. Marjolin de Jager (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Anyaduba, *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>27</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Anyaduba, *The Postcolonial African Genocide Novel*, 176–177.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 209.