Arts & Literature: The Haunts of Biafra Photography

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Introduction
In this piece, I reflect briefly on an iconic Biafra atrocity photograph of a starving mother and child. My curiosity is on the implications of the photograph’s lack of biographical details, its enlistment for affect by a Western gaze, and its circulation in Holocaust survivor oral history. My sense is that the image’s lack of biography transforms it into a ghost and works to conceal the historical and structural conditions of the violence it is assumedly depicting.
The British photojournalist Don McCullin’s photograph of a starving mother and child has appeared at different moments in my study of the literatures and arts of the Biafra-Nigeria War (1967–1970) as though it were a haunt. McCullin took the photograph in a refugee camp in Biafra in 1968 at the height of the mass starvation due to the war unleashed by Nigeria’s Federal Military Government upon Biafra’s population. I must have seen the photograph a couple of times on the internet many years ago but my coming into a scholarly consciousness of it as a Biafra atrocity photograph was in 2012 following the publication of Chinua Achebe’s memoir, There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra. Achebe’s book was then the basis of debates raging across Nigerian media and social media spaces. McCullin’s Biafra photographs, including the starving mother and child, were among several photographs that circulated in these media spaces for different purposes among different groups. There were those who used such images to argue that the Nigerian government perpetrated a genocide against Igbo peoples during the war, as well as those who used the images to mock the memory of Igbo victims.

I would subsequently encounter the photograph of the starving mother and child in a few public spaces and in other contexts during my PhD program in Canada and after. In each of those encounters, something about that photograph haunted me. I had wondered what this haunt might be: whether it was the graphic horror the image shows, whether it was my struggles to find an interpretive position (one that was valid and convincing), or whether it was my own projection of a traumatic imaginary onto the image, spurred by stories of my family’s struggles for survival at the time. Over time, I came to recognize a crucial tension in these contemplations of the photograph’s haunting quality. This tension is informed by a recognition of the ghostly character of the photograph. I use ghost or ghostliness to suggest the condition of stripping an atrocity photograph of its historical and contextual character. The photograph of the starving mother and child represents a ghostly image because it has been deprived of any biographical detail and decontextualized. Its ghostliness, as I will go on to elaborate, is the work of a Western gaze that mobilizes the photograph for affect. Cultivated for its affect, the photograph works to mask the structural conditions of atrocity.

In 2013, I saw a special exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) dedicated to McCullin’s atrocity photography; McCullin’s Biafra photograph of the starving mother and her child was one of the pictures on display. The special exhibition was accompanied by a public lecture on atrocity photography and the arts. Incidentally, the focal image of the short lecture was, indeed, McCullin’s photograph of the starving mother and child. The image illustrates a malnourished woman with a child clutching and squeezing one of its mother’s shriveled breasts as the mother stares directly, tiredly, into the camera. Mother and child are in the foreground of the picture. In the background are shadowy images of other famished children in the room. The lecturer at the exhibition let the audience take in the image before somberly posing questions about its potentially affective significance: Does it succeed/fail in representing atrocity? What exactly makes it succeed or fail? Does it make us empathize with the suffering of the mother and child? What is accomplished by such photographs in representing unimaginable violence?

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1 Don McCullin, Starving Twenty Four Year Old Mother with Child, Biafra, 1968, gelatin silver print on paper, 54.50 x 35.50 cm (framed: 76.00 x 57.00 cm), Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/120207/starving-twenty-four-year-old-mother-child-biafra.

These are the kinds of questions about atrocity photography that often provoke intense discussions and debates in my classroom, especially for students and scholars who, like me, are invested in examining the significance and work of cultural representations. We look at the image and contemplate the bare horror of its capture: how, for example, it signifies the violence done not only to the gaunt bodies of the famished mother and child but also to that maternal care and bond that a mother’s body supplies; how the photograph’s portrayal of suffering depends on its spectacular visual form; how its striking visual may work to mobilize affect required for political and other actions. Contemplated in this way, with attention on its connotative and denotative potential, the image might be understood as a spectacle of suffering, staging for its spectator the “tragic fate of futile motherly love” in the face of genocide and war.

Yet, I am not so sure whether it is the futility of motherly affection that troubles me about the picture. Or whether it is the photograph’s graphic representation of the suffering of the mother and child and its staging of the subjects’ violated bodies into spectacles of suffering for privileged Western viewers who were its primary target audience. There seems to be something else, according to the lecturer, that subjective, affective meaning a photograph suggests to a viewer, a meaning that is private and irreducible to the cultural codes available to the viewer. According to the lecturer, atrocity photographs such as the photograph of the starving Biafra mother and child succeed and transcend their specific historical contexts because of the punctum. He argued that the punctum of the atrocity photograph is what allows it to communicate an intensely private meaning of an atrocity to a viewer. It communicates such meaning, according to the lecturer, often accidentally by wounding the viewer with its poignancy. So presented, the image is granted an agency of affect. The gallery exhibition viewer is invited to surrender themselves to the image, to put aside their cultural experiences and dispositions, and to allow the image’s punctum to prick them with its poignancy.

I left the WAG exhibition’s lecture that evening not sure what and how to think about this photograph of the Biafra mother and her child. I believe my thoughts then were not so engrossed with questions about the image’s punctum. I was, by then, convinced that Western academic and other discourses on atrocity photographs were largely informed by a focus on the body in extreme pain: the body as a witnessable site of injury, the body as a script upon which extreme violence is written and put on display to cultivate affect.

My anxiety generally comes from a recognition that the body in pain on display is often the racialized body made widely available for Western spectating—not made any easier when the body in pain is the racialized Black body, which has been historically and regularly demeaned and devalued. Therefore, it becomes, sometimes, difficult for a type of viewer to understand how such a body can provoke empathy and command representational power in its state of indignity and vulnerability. This anxiety was further informed as the photograph of the starving mother and child lacked any detailed contextual information beyond mention of it being taken from the Biafran War zone. There was no biographical information at the exhibition nor is it available on the internet. What are their names? Did they survive the war years? Are they still alive? Did they and/or their relatives know about the iconic status of this photograph? What might they think and feel about this photograph over the years since it was taken?

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4 These questions have continued to haunt me and have provided the basis for my ongoing research on the cultural representations of Biafra mass starvation as well as my plans to search for the real human subjects of several Biafra atrocity images—iconic and otherwise—that circulated internationally. It seems worth doing but I do not know to what end, yet.
The *Sunday Times* magazine of June 1, 1969, where the photograph was arguably first used, captioned the image as follows: “A 24-year-old mother…” The magazine was more interested in the woman’s age and her status as a young mother. The National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) which purchased the image rights in 2013 and where it is currently housed, captions it similarly: “Starving Twenty Four Year Old Mother with Child, Biafra,”5 classifying it as “artwork.” As artwork, the NGS describes the photograph as “a harrowing portrait of a starving mother attempting to breastfeed her child with shriveled breasts. She is dignified, looking the viewer straight in the eye, and the composition not only gives the subject a voice but also intends to give the viewer a conscious obligation, igniting action.”6

I am not sure what is dignified about the woman in the picture, nor do I understand how the photograph gives her a voice. The picture is not dignifying, not redeeming, and not agenting its subjects. What I see is ruthless obscenity; stripped of any significant contextual and biographical detail, transformed into an artwork testifying to the carnage of a vague war, its subjects anonymized and made into generic victims, the image is left with nothing else. As a result, it transforms the situation it is witnessing into a ghost. It is on account of its ghostly character that the photograph refuses to take on a character in my thoughts.

It is not only that the photograph lacks adequate contextual information for understanding the atrocity it documents, or that its uses, in different settings, have failed to engage the political and historical contexts of the photograph. My frustration stems even more from the broader colonial archive that structures encounters of this photograph. This colonial archive marks an ongoing process of frenzied capturing and synchronization of data about the world, especially the world of colonized peoples. As Okwui Enwezor reminds us, the colonial archive resulted from a feverish imperial impulse to amass classified data. The “obsessive principle of [the colonial] archival formation” was to use such data to produce knowledge, to classify the world and regularize the violence of imperialism. In the colonial archival system, colonized peoples (Africans especially) are fixed or classified in terms amenable to “imperial ambitions and the Western gaze.”7 This archive—and photography is very instrumental in an archive’s making and ongoingness—turns experience into objects or data, often with the aim of regulating and controlling what is known and can be felt about people.

This recognition of Western photography as an ideological construction and instrumentation of apolitical and decontextualized affect in response to atrocities in Africa—atrocities carried out at the behest of empire—is the source of the anxiety one finds in several African cultural representations of atrocity photography. An important example is found in Amos Tutuola’s 1952 novella, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which offers one of the first representations of photography in “Nigerian” literature. The novella chronicles the magical and absurd quests of a man in the bush of ghosts and monstrosities that may be read allegorically as a colonial world. At different points in the quest, the man and his wife encounter figures and forces “focusing us as if a photographer was focusing somebody.”8 In the context of the story, to be focused is to be made the object of a monstrous gaze, a stripping of the subject of substance and circumstance, a ghosting process. At one point, the questers find themselves unable to escape this colonial photographic gaze, which finally forces them into a white hall of pictures:

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6 Ibid.


[T]here were many images and our own too were in the centre of the hall. But our own images that we saw there resembled us too much and were also white colour, but we were very surprised to meet our images there, perhaps somebody who was focusing us as a photographer at the first time before the hands drew us inside the white tree had made them, we could not say.9

The couple is surprised to find a collection of photographs about them in the hall, photographs of themselves in “white colour”. Even with this recognition, the couple is unable to escape. The colonial hall of photographs traps and bribes them with an aestheticized whitening of their experience until they almost forget how to survive in the absurd world of ghosts. Tutuola’s vision of Western colonial photography about African struggles instigated by colonization underscores the process of colonial ghosting whereby the violence of imperialism is objectified, decontextualized, apoliticized, and ahistoricized, until it cannot be recognized for what it is. Put differently, African atrocity photographs “focused” by the Western gaze mask their atrocity subjects.

As a ghost, the photograph of the starving Biafra mother and child sacrifices understanding for affect and as such becomes a spectral symbol attesting to the violation of the eternal love between a mother and her child—the image becoming an iteration of a Madonna and Child. In 2019, McCullin, while reflecting on the enormity of the suffering he witnessed in Biafra, would describe his photograph of the starving mother and child as follows: “This woman here, she’s 24 and close to death. It’s almost a Madonna and child picture, in the wrong sense.”10 Strangely, it is this form of ghostly symbolism that Chinua Achebe has pre-empted in his 1969 poem, “Refugee Mother and Child” (published in his 1971 collection Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems)11 reflecting in part on, most likely, McCullin’s photograph, when he writes:

No Madonna and Child could touch
that picture of a mother’s tenderness
for a son she soon would forget.12

Achebe’s poem invokes the Christian religious imagery of the Madonna and Child to articulate the condition of violence and starvation in Biafra during the war. In this and other poems, he criticizes the Western photographic gaze masking the imperial contexts of the mass starvation in Biafra. In the titular poem of his collection “Christmas in Biafra,” which Achebe also wrote in 1969 presumably while in a refugee camp, the image of the starving mother and child vis-à-vis the Madonna and Child emerges yet again. A group of European nuns at a refugee camp hospital in Biafra:

had set up a manger
of palms to house a fine plastercast
scene at Bethlehem. The Holy
Family was central, serene, the Child

9 Ibid., 68.
12 Ibid., 24.
Jesus plump wise-looking and rose-cheeked.  

A famine-ravaged mother and her child join a group of other famished refugees to “pay their homage [to the Holy Family]” because it is Christmas. Unlike the plastercast of plump, rose-cheeked Jesus, the famished child is resting on his mother’s shoulder “flat like a dead lizard […] / his arms and legs cauterized by famine was a miracle / of its kind.” The poor mother, in an attempt to cheer her miracle of a child, points to the “pretty figures of God / and angels and men and beasts— / a spectacle to stir the heart of a child.” But the poor boy, past such absurdity, mopes “at [the] empty distance” as the mother “shrugged her shoulders, crossed / herself again and took him away.”

This poem puts the starvation in the context of a Western Christian and humanitarian missionary activity, juxtaposing a famished mother and her child with healthy-looking effigies. The poem plays on multiple ironies. For one, it depicts the violence of starvation—its decimation of a child’s body—as a miracle comparable to the miracle of divine conception and birth. In Achebe’s imagination, the horrors of the starvation must indeed have produced a comparable miracle considering the frenzy in Western media at the time to witness the horror by capturing photographic images of starving bodies.

Yet, that Achebe’s poems show a fascination with the Biafra Madonna and Child, indicates the photograph’s haunting character. It appears, therefore, that in becoming a ghost—that is, deprived of biographical and contextual signification—the photograph becomes able to haunt.

— III —

My idea of haunt here comes from Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved. In the context of the novel, a haunt is the picture that stays—like a spectre—after a house is gone. It is a form of memory or what Morrison describes as rememory in Beloved. The passage in Morrison’s novel where Sethe reflects on her experience of slavery to explain the iterative condition of Black enslavement to her daughter Denver is instructive:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it —stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh yes. Oh yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So

13 Ibid., 26–27.
14 Ibid., 27.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 28.
clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else [...]”

Rememory is a reiterative condition, a traumatic memory that recurs across time and space, a floating picture that subjects across time “bump into” and relive. Rememory, in the context of *Beloved*, underscores the enduring and iterative character of slavery. According to Sethe, this character of slavery is its placedness. A house may burn down, “but the place—the picture of it—stays.” In other words, the visible structures of slavery—the plantation, the cotton fields, and so on—may have been dismantled, yet their traumatic place—the picture of it, a thought picture, its conceptual and epistemic place, its transfiguration—stays. Rememory recalls this floating, invisible picture that has been turned into a ghost. *Beloved’s* main triumph might rest crucially on how it narrates this ghost back into visibility if only to put it into a clearer perspective.

The haunt of the atrocity photograph of the kind I have been wrestling with occurs when one bumps into and relives that traumatic place—the picture of it—forced into invisibility or into ghostliness by the Western gaze.

— IV —

A few years ago during a research fellowship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), I came across a Holocaust survivor oral history interview given by Tonia Rothkopf Blair. As part of a larger project on the cultural representations of the genocide of the Igbo before and during the Biafra-Nigeria War, I was then exploring links, mentions, traces of Biafra and Igbo suffering during the war in Holocaust survivor oral histories, a study that was motivated, in part, by my readings in multidirectional memory discourse. I was interested in the discourse, which trotting on Michael Rothberg’s 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory*, seemed committed to making visible the linkages of the Holocaust and other genocides, the ways that mass atrocities came into meanings through their entanglements with other atrocities. Lasse Heerten’s 2017 book, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism*, centred Biafra in the discourse to highlight, among other things, the Biafran conflict as a global moment in international humanitarian practice and the limitations of this conflict’s entanglements with the then emerging Holocaust and human rights discourses of the 1960s. Yet, unlike these works that tracked the influences of the Holocaust on other atrocities, especially in African contexts, my interest was more in the particulars of Biafra in Holocaust memory—specifically, the pulls of the Biafran conflict on Holocaust survivor memory—even if only to understand how an African genocide might be shaping meanings and recognitions of genocidal violence elsewhere. It is not often the case that African experiences form the basis for meaning-making anywhere, even on the continent.

Blair’s interview was originally conducted by the Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project in 1983 and later donated to the USHMM archives in 2007. Blair’s was among a decent list of

records that came up when I filtered my search using Biafra as a keyword. I found only one marginal reference to Biafra in Blair’s oral history interview. Yet, her interview stood out—notwithstanding the one reference—because I found this only mention crucially significant for its relation to a major theme of the entire interview: genocide as an affront on familial forms of belonging and connection.

— V —

Just before her reference to Biafra, Blair described an encounter she witnessed at Auschwitz that was a point of disagreement between her and her son Nicky. It concerned a German soldier who took a baby from its young mother and gave it to an older Jewish woman standing in a group of prisoners heading for immediate termination. The young mother wept in uncontrollable agony, for the brutal separation from her baby, perhaps unbeknownst to her, that keeping her baby was an immediate death sentence on them both. Blair believed at that point that the German soldier “saved” the young mother from immediate death, whether he intended it or not. Nicky disagreed and, according to Blair, Nicky argued that separating the mother and her baby was evil, and that it could never be an act of saving.

Blair’s interview is haunted by crippling situations such as this one, traumatic moments of familial disintegration, of the paradoxes of alienation and survival—where what seems like a providential intervention is at one and the same time an unqualifiable act of cruelty. Earlier in her interview, Blair recollects a similar scenario of her own separation from her family when a childhood friend who was with the military pushed her away from her family members as they were rounded up to be deported to their deaths. That was the last time she ever saw them.

I believe Blair was still quietly pondering the confounding logic of this Auschwitz encounter that recalled the conditions of her own separation from her family when the interviewer—impatiently, it seemed to me—hurried her into another question: “Anything else come to your mind? Any other human connection?” Blair’s immediate response was “No, no,” clearly still in her thoughts about her recollections of the young mother whose supposed saving relied on losing her baby. The interviewer presses further: “Did you see anyone having romances in the camp?”

I do not know exactly why I found the question about camp romances very frustrating. Perhaps it was because I did not think that the camp Blair described so hauntingly was a place to search for, let alone ponder about, romance. In answering the camp romance question, Blair recounts “a terrible thing” that happened in her unit where young Jewish women were kept following a German’s escape with a Jewish woman. As punishment, the Jewish women were lined up in tens in the middle of a wintry night. The tenth person in each line was killed. Blair was not aware at the time why they were lined up outside that night. She was the ninth person in her line. The tenth was shot. This scenario, just like the other confounding ones, was confusing to the survivor. While the interviewer seemed invested in harvesting a romance story out of the situation, the scenario provided an occasion for Blair to reflect more generally on the condition of the young Jewish girls in the camp:

INTERVIEWER: How about...

BLAIR: And then I heard that they [the German officer and the Jewish girl he ran away with] were caught and killed but I don’t know how this...
INTERVIEWER: How about the...

BLAIR: Some of the girls were [indescribable]. I mean just like people anywhere. As I said again, we were still young, remember. I don’t know if you ever saw the pictures of Biafra, the mother looks decrepit, but the child is, still has flesh on it, and we were—I’m ashamed in a way, but we still—well, I didn’t look like [that] now—but still looked—if you dressed us up you could look like quite, “normal,” yeah. And some of them were incredible.”

Even though Blair used “pictures,” I believe she was referring to McCullin’s photograph of the starving mother and her child. I found Blair’s reference to Biafra in the context strange because there was no direct connection of Biafra to the question she was responding to and the experience she was describing. Her reference to Biafra (in 1983, that is, 13-years after the end of the Biafran War) is perhaps indicative of the profound effect of Biafra atrocity photographs she saw in the media in the late 1960s during the war.

Blair’s reference to the Biafra photograph was not an isolated case. Some other Holocaust survivors (and children of survivors) interviewed in the 1980s and 1990s made similar references to Biafra. The Biafra atrocity photographs that held sway in the Holocaust survivors’ memories were often those of mass starvation victims—images showing famished bodies, children with distended bellies and heads and skeletal hands and legs, images of cadaverous-looking women. The Biafran photos allowed the survivors to speak about their own Holocaust experiences in comparative and referential terms. Sometimes one senses the uncomfortable sentiment the survivors expressed in their interviews about how their experience was more severe than the atrocities in Biafra or elsewhere. Other times, references to Biafra provided the occasion for the survivor to condemn the world for allowing genocides to persist even after the Holocaust.

This pattern of reference is partly what the discourse on multidirectional memory emphasizes. In the Biafran context, the point is to show the cultural and historical significance of Biafra atrocity photography (and media reportage) in the emergence of Holocaust memory and postcolonial humanitarian discourses more broadly. One explanation for how Biafra entered into Holocaust survivor memory is based on the understanding of Western media representations of Igbo suffering during the Biafran War that deliberately and vigorously compared Igbo experiences to those of Jewish prisoners in different Nazi death camps. It meant, in the context of Blair’s oral history, that the photograph of Igbo suffering in Biafra provided a traumatic visual equivalence that allowed Blair to process or relive her own and other Jewish people’s experiences at the Nazi death camp. As Lasse Heerten would argue, a major implication of this pattern of entanglement is that it operates under the Western gaze to efface the historical, political, and other contexts specific to each atrocity experience in favor of a seemingly mutual humanitarian program founded on the rhetoric of genocide. This position recalls my earlier anxiety about the ghosting work of the Western gaze. So, while not disagreeing with this view of the cultural significance and implication of “the pictures of Biafra” (à la Blair), I also sense a haunting in the photograph that throws it into a relationality with other atrocity experiences. I have invoked Blair’s reference to the photograph of the Biafra mother and child not merely to underline the multidirectional process of atrocity memory as it were, but for a different reason: to highlight this haunting.

20 Blair, Oral History Interview with Tonia Blair; emphasis added. Source first mentioned in note 18.
21 See, for example, Heerten, The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism.
Rememory clarifies Blair’s reference to the starving Biafra mother and child. Her reference is a “bumping into” an invisible traumatic place that the photograph has facilitated. In other words, the survivor invoked the picture of the Biafra mother and child not so much to describe the emaciated condition of young Jewish women in Auschwitz, but instead as a traumatic contemplation on the genocidal affront on family—her family.