
Narrow Escapes: Gendered Adolescent Resistance to Intergenerational Neo/Colonial Violence across Time and Space

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*If you want to know the future of a society, look at the eyes of the children.
If you want to maim the future of any society, you simply maim the children.*
--Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993 (76)

*They had to learn that this was part of their history too.
All this happened at the time that they were growing up and
their parents were raising them and sending them to school.
While this was happening to us, they were happily playing in their backyards.
They weren't taught in schools about this other side of . . . the dark history, if you like.*
--Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, interviewed by Anne Brewster, 2007 (158)

This paper draws into conversation three texts published over the course of as many centuries, interrogating principle assumptions that inform the colonialist *Bildungsroman*. The difficult “coming of age” experiences recounted in these works challenge the possibility and merit of successful integration within a corrupt prevailing order. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara’s *Rabbit Proof Fence* (1999), and Uwem Akpan’s *Fattening for Gabon* (2008), all shed light on severe conditions endured by their protagonists—beginning at an early age—from the point of view of an adult who remembers or reconstructs that history. Each work invites critical resistance to prevailing discourses by tracing the implications of an inspired, if desperate, escape from an intolerable future. Each escape tests the elasticity of bonds with people and places left behind¹, under constrained circumstances, at a decisive turning point. The extremes of menace, risk and anguish the young characters endure expose reified failures of compassion that structure each social order represented. At the same time, the wit and courage the young people show in their arduous journeys toward some kind of autonomy, subvert projected and internalized forms of colonialist infantilization, which deliver harmful effects to both subaltern and dominant groups, respectively, through different, but related processes of miseducation.

Devaluation and control of racialized women, children and communities are a common denominator to all of the rapacious, “democratic” market-state

regimes called into question by these writers. Read together, they enable a form of “memory work”² that engages the extended struggles for interpretive power enacted by each text (Wright 380). Drawing upon temporal arcs of youthful becoming, these writers affirm intergenerational care within and across social groups. Readers are invited to consider, through the eyes of oppressed youth, what it might mean to bring a more just and genuine, relationally-oriented “learning spirit” to processes of community- and nation-building. Such a learning spirit involves being with and attending to “multiple iterations of loss” in order to heal the interwoven traumas that condition scattered³ neo/colonialisms (Coleman 148). By virtue of their address to divergent coming-of-age processes, the young lives represented underscore the transformative power of narrative demands for extended accountabilities among projected audiences.

As a scholar of child and youth trauma and resilience, and member of a broader company of privileged one-third⁴ world readers implicitly or explicitly summoned as audience by these texts, I find myself interpolated by accounts of structural violence endured in childhood or youth, as reconsidered by an adult narrator who reflects and writes. In an effort to move beyond the “indifference of the West and its appetite for sensationalization” (Cazenave 63), my goal is to provide what Cindi Katz (2004) has termed a counter-topographical (156) reading of the alternative potentials implied through each lead character’s libratory course of action, in the context of the harsh intersectional politics that inform distinct neo/colonialisms. What strikes me about these three texts, in particular, is the wide spatial and temporal distribution of discrete expressions of neo/colonial violence directed toward subaltern children and youth, and through them, their relations with cultures of origin. On the flipside, the powerfully embodied interventions undertaken by the protagonist mark a conscious and material point of departure from socially-scripted outcomes for young lives placed in jeopardy by patriarchal power. Through what Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar call “active positioning” (7), each protagonist uses her or his own life and body to perform what Darren O’Donnell terms an act of “social acupuncture,” destabilizing normative expectations and distortions to such a degree that each revised life path opens new possibilities, unavailable before. These protagonists are able to resist, at least for a time, the overarching neo/colonial laws and institutions that infringe upon their movements of conscience and choice. As a result, they learn to “write on the world” through the resistant actions of their gendered, willful young bodies. Salvaging undervalued or misrecognized interstitial spaces⁵ and opportunities, each one finds a way to seize precious time and to generate fresh prospects for themselves and, in some cases, others. The narrow escapes they

achieve are summarized briefly, in chronological order, below.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Lynda Brent, a.k.a. Harriet Jacobs, a mixed-race slave girl, “chooses” adolescent pregnancy by a prominent white statesman, then hides for seven long years in a cramped garret, in efforts to escape certain and repeated sexual assault by her former slave-owner, a “respectable” white physician from the American South, who had been attempting to groom her acceptance of his unwanted advances since puberty. Her long interval of relative isolation deepens her analysis of the degradations she and others face under slavery. Lynda Brent’s eventual flight north ultimately secures greater freedoms for herself and her children, if not a home for them to share. The title of Harriet Jacobs’ work, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, emphasizes the premature sexualisation of girls and the enforced infantilization to which slaves were subject, as compared to the distorting ignorance about slavery under which white children often grew up. Jacobs seeks to undo that ignorance, particularly among northern white women, whom she cultivates as potential allies, by sharing her story.

In direct contrast to Brent’s strategically protracted stasis in her tiny, secret hiding place, early in the twentieth century, a young Aboriginal girl guides her even younger female cousins nearly a thousand miles across the Australian outback, using her cultural kinship with the land to escape indentured service to white colonialists. Settlers were encouraged to appropriate mixed-race children in state-sponsored processes of “rescue,” after proprietary land enclosures forced indigenous/Aboriginal inhabitants to abandon nomadic lives for designated settlements. Colonialist seizure of lands and peoples was informed by eugenics-infused discourses that sexualized indigenous women and children in practices of social infantilization, not unlike those operating under slavocracy⁶ (Brewster, “Aboriginal Life Writing” 155-56). In a paradoxical twist, Molly Kelly’s story is told by the grown daughter she was forced to leave behind as a toddler, because she was too young to accompany her mother and sister, a babe in arms, across miles of outback.

Finally, at the turn of the twenty-first century, a ten-year-old Nigerian boy whose parents have contracted HIV-AIDS and can no longer care for their children, abandons his captive younger sister in order to seize a split-second chance to flee the burgeoning child sex trade in contemporary west Africa, carrying with him a terrible and lasting legacy of grief and loss. *Fattening for Gabon* uses French-inflected patois and an upcoming sea voyage to Gabon to generalize the location of the children’s incarceration, not far from the Nigerian coast.

These works relate the histories of young people forced to risk their own and—in some cases—the well-being of others in exchange for a semblance of survival

and actualization, however diminished by intrusive injustices that “relegat[e] the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood” (Mbembe 26). Achilles Mbembe reads such “zones of indistinction” (to borrow a term from Giorgio Agamben)⁷, as a by-product of “necropolitics,” whereby dominating power wedes the justifications of western rationalism to socio-political mechanisms that deliver poverty and death to subordinated persons and populations under neo/colonialisms. Through manipulation of spatial relations among dominant and subaltern groups—such that physical or psychic distance supports plausible deniability among the privileged, while social proximity enables control of the subordinated—the colony functions as a site where violence, “deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization,’” occurs as a permanent, spatially distributed “exception” to humane laws (Mbembe 24). Under the obscuring distances traversed by globalizing regimes and the guise of paternalistic forms of juridical and social “protection,” the coercive libidinal economies depicted in these works enforce relentless processes of alienation and injury to subaltern groups. Involuntary removal of people from familiar landscapes and contexts of home prevents the gathering of necessary critical mass to defend inherent and collective rights, and creates multiple scales for further violation. Forced migrations within and across borders still convert pain and loss among the dispossessed into measurable gains among those to whom power and wealth accrue through such means. Symbolic transactional capital and institutionalized power play allied roles in isolating adverse conditions in some projected “elsewhere” or “extraneous” past among “irrelevant” others.

Whatever opportunities for change that are precipitated by the youthful, narrow escapes under review, these are histories that still hurt, and not only for those most directly affected. Sara Ahmed argues that “A concern with histories that hurt is not . . . a backward orientation; to move on, you must make this return. If anything, we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good” (50). Chronicling youthful indoctrination into the concentrationary⁸ systems Mbembe describes is an effective strategy for supporting mindful return to the formative traumas of colonial contact, with its multiple modes of aftermath. Anne Brewster argues that such stories help to broker reconciliation among those who have benefitted and those who have suffered from neo/colonialisms by “transforming the space of terror into a contact zone” that reaffirms the “spatial coexistence of memories previously quarantined by humanist history” (159). Surfacing Western modernity’s “repressed topographies of cruelty . . . [of] the plantation and the colony in particular,” these accounts posit alternative

outcomes for subjectivities formed under still salient globalizing fantasies of allegedly limitless economic growth (Mbembe 40). Grounded in distinct places and periods and relying on representational strategies that range from autobiography to co-biography and fictionalization, the three works examined here are pulled into affective proximity by their engagements with youthful memories of practices crafted under colonialism to breach familial, communal and place-based ties.

In each of the texts selected, maternal/familial/tribal relations with children are impaired and disrupted in service of profoundly aggressive and sadistic forms of institutionalized propertied patriarchy. This is no accident. Disruptions of home, trust and kinship systems form a gender-based bulwark of colonial power, harnessing women's reproductive labor to totalizing patriarchal agendas. As Veronica Strong-Boag argues, "the well-being of the young can[not] be disassociated from the liberation of women to make real choices about their lives, how to support themselves, with whom to partner, and whether or not to have children and how many"(5). The dangers faced by the young protagonists in these texts are directly related to the socially constructed vulnerabilities of their mothers and, in the case of young women, their own power to make free and informed choices to mother, or not. This feminist insight into the political importance of supporting women's autonomy within a more publically-invested collective ethics of care⁹ has been theorized by indigenous scholars in spatialized terms. Where globalizing forces sever sustainable land-based relations with a maternally imagined planet or landscape, for example, Bonita Lawrence reads displaced Indigenous communities as a diaspora of the interior, peopled by refugees of multiple forced dispersals within the colonial state (6).

This imaginative extended matrix of kith, kin and ground provides the conceptual backdrop for the critical readings undertaken in this paper, which chart the violation of intergenerational attachments to matri-lines, families, Indigenous peoples and their familiar landscapes, in relation to one another. The appalling practices described in these texts cannot be enacted without consequences to the privileged classes themselves, who would rarely tolerate such violence toward their own children—whose futures are also impacted—whether or not that danger is immediately recognized. Terrorizing lives that unfold within or beyond one's own family or community is equally monstrous, as co-reading these narratives illustrates.

In the mid-nineteenth century life-world that Harriet Jacobs seeks to make visible, first to contemporary northern white women whose lives have been directly or indirectly bank-rolled by her losses under slavery, to be an adolescent slave girl means facing a one hundred percent chance of sexual assault and therefore to be

seen as “promiscuous”; to be a mother is to witness the forced removal of one’s children into slavery, where one’s best hope may be to purchase their freedom at some future time, against all odds constructed by the prosperous to deprive those whose lives are viewed as property from accumulating even small amounts of personal resources. Similarly, for Doris Pilkington/ Nugi Garimara, forced removals of Aboriginal children to residential training “stations” and subsequent hire or outright adoption to settler families (well into the twentieth century) lead to enforced loss of culture and connection among children, families and cosmos, all seen by those most affected to be striving by available material and/or metaphysical means to reclaim both. In the contemporary life-world drawn by Uwen Akpan, the intergenerational costs of the long-neglected scourge of HIV in Africa renders children vulnerable to forms of sex trafficking wherein familial affections are reinterpreted to brutal advantage in securing compliance with ever more vicious forms of enclosure and abuse. Such distorted affective¹⁰ regimes continue to shape normative gendered pathways, haunted by ghosts of the mercilessly abandoned or devalued, and by neglected collective opportunities to do better.

The gendered, spatialized and temporal acts to which I refer in this paper are undertaken by two subaltern girls and one Nigerian boy, also “feminized” through his vulnerable social position and his construction as sexual prey. Feminized social positions occur among males when their lives are circumscribed or subjected to forms of violence similar to those endured by women and girls, as a result of the double-edged exploitation of gender binaries and racial hierarchies. In this case, Kotchikpa, who makes his own narrow escape from a child trafficking ring, loses all contact with his beloved younger sister, Yewa; thus, his gift of freedom becomes his relational injury. Isaac Ndlovu reads such brutal childhood loss, commonplace in contemporary African literature, as a mark of the failure of post-colonial revolutions to deliver stable social conditions in the context of structural adjustment policies originating from elsewhere (71, 82). Similarly, Odile Cazanave reads painful contemporary African childhoods and the authors who take them up as evidence of “the utter de-structuration and dislocation of society, where postcolonial violence can be seen as only a continuation of colonial violence and practices of domination and power” (63). Akpan’s text acknowledges this contouring pressure as a terrible, crushing familial loss, intensifying most profoundly in the lives of children orphaned through converging concentrations of poverty, disease and deliberate uneven development. Jacobs and Pilkington/ Garimara’s texts confirm Cazanave’s analysis. The immiserated childhoods and young lives remembered in their works expose the roots of contemporary intergenerational violence in long-standing patriarchal neo/colonialist practices.

By subverting the classic *Bildungsroman* to expose such targeted cruelties, these authors demand intercultural forms of learning and literacy that can foster more just models of the “social good.”

Each narrative gauges differential access to a range of functional literacies that are specific to the situated contexts and events they record. Jacobs/Brent hides her illegal ability to read and write from a master who would use these skills against her in his transparent and disturbing attempts to secure her “consent” to his “seduction.” Molly, who brings her cousins and her youngest daughter home across the outback, can read the land in ways that the colonialists have long since forgotten, or perhaps never knew. Young Kotchikpa and his sister Yewa slowly learn to decipher the nefarious intentions of the adults around them. These practical, affective literacies point to deficiencies in all forms of education that do not prepare learners to redress imbalanced power relations, or to resist the inevitable social and environmental destruction that accompanies neo/colonialist refusals to learn the rhythms and needs of the lands and peoples that once co-existed in mutual relation, prior to contact.

The form of situated alternative literacy each protagonist mobilizes is accompanied by a confession of some measure of “ignorance” of dominant lexicons of power and the selective pathways to prosperity they enable. In her Preface, Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent writes, “I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances” (1). Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara finds relearning the culture she had lost, after 14 years spent in Moore River Settlement, an “exhausting and interesting experience” (xi). In order to reconstruct the realities her mother and aunts faced as children, she writes: “I had to become a ten-year-old girl again in order to draw on my own childhood memories of the countryside surrounding the settlement . . . combining my imagination and the information from records of geographical and botanical explorations undertaken in the area during the early 1900s” (xii). Kotchikpa constantly refers to the credulity he shares with Yewa, as events unfold in *Fattening for Gabon*. Such “deficiencies” do not reflect so much on the limitations of the young people involved as upon dominant narratives and communities of practice that would exclude them. At the same time, each of the authors affirms loving values learned in the contexts of families and cultures that colonizers have found it expedient to despise. All three authors position the developmental stories of their young protagonists in relation to their efforts to maintain lines of communication among family and community members, however distended by the oppressive operations of regional, national and global capital and power. In these worlds, there are no guarantees or proven formulae

for progress, but there are opportunities to recalibrate affective loyalties, through processes of self-naming or resistance to imposed names, in each context.

Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the pseudonym Linda Brent in 1861. She uses a nom de plume in order to provide an anonymized account of her seven-year ordeal, hiding from the rapacious attentions of slave-owner, Dr. James Norcom, known as Dr. Flint in the text. The subtitle “written by herself” was necessary, because, even during the abolitionist movement, literacy was legally denied to slaves in many American states, and to slave women in particular. Therefore, it was much more common to have a white person acting as amanuensis, as was the case with Rigoberta Menchu’s initial autobiography. Jacobs’ pseudonym serves, at the time, to protect her liberty and the identities of those who secured her eventual passage north.

Rabbit Proof Fence by Doris Pilkington/ Nugi Garimara, was first published in 1996, and made into a feature film by Mirimax in 2002, two years before one of its primary subjects, Molly Kelly, died of old age in her beloved community of Jigalong (Lovrod 54). This work chronicles the escape from Western Australia’s Moore River Settlement, by the author’s mother and aunties who, as Indigenous adolescents, sought to avoid a racist form of differential education, meted out by colonial governments to mark Indigenous, settler, and privileged children with distinctive processes of subject formation. Pilkington/Garimara, who was herself incarcerated at Moore River as a child, uses the process of writing to rebuild her access to a world view and way of being that she was denied by her captors; at the time of writing, she had not fully recovered her mother tongue (see interview with Anne Brewster (2007), 155). Pilkington/Garimara’s split name is the product of her experiences as subject to Western Australia’s “Chief Protector of Aborigines.” She negotiates her identity in competing social systems—Aboriginal and Australian—in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, within both of which she remains marginalized to varying degrees.

Uwem Akpan’s *Fattening for Gabon* was published in 2011. The novella offers a fictionalized account of the process of preparing rural African children to be delivered into the child sex trade, from the point of view of young Kotchikpa, who slowly comes to realize how his affections and trust have been manipulated, as the noose of captivity tightens incrementally around himself and his younger sister. He suffers encroaching indignities at the hands of family members, educators, a corrupt customs and immigration official, and a couple who pose as NGO social workers in a falsified performance of “loving” adoption that requires the children to change their names from Kotchikpa and Yewa to Pascal and Mary, respectively. Akpan’s protagonists, like Pilkington/Garimara’s, find themselves renamed by

their traffickers in an approximation of affection that quickly becomes vicious. In all cases, the need for a way out of the difficult impasses created by related and recurring neo/colonialist practices of naming, objectifying, appropriation and regulation, is pressing.

Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent strategizes her emergence into more libratory space through self-confinement—a stasis of the body—secreted away for seven years in a cramped, windowless, meter-high crawl space above a two-by-three meter shed, adjoining her grandmother's home. Enduring long periods of immobility, freezing in winter, roasting in summer—to such an extent that she retained a weakness in her legs and ankles for the rest of her life—Jacobs'/Brent's embodied stationary strategy enables a remarkable responsive social mobility in later life, as she negotiates personal freedom for her children, and to a significant degree, herself. Without the knowledge of her children, whom she views through a knot hole she bores out in the clapboards that frame her enclosure; indeed, without the knowledge of most of her neighbors, who were thus conscripted into spreading the story of her escape to the north, she remains hidden in plain sight, under the nose of Dr. Flint, who would have liked to take her against her will as his captive consort. Jean Fagan Yellin, in her introduction to the Harvard edition describes Jacobs/Brent' cell, with its pin-hole-like aperture, in terms that might suggest a still picture camera:

She uses her garret cell as a war room from which to spy on her enemy and to wage psychological warfare against him. From her cramped hiding place, she manipulates the sale of her children to their father, arranges for her daughter to be taken north, tricks her master into believing that she has left the South, and quite literally directs a performance in which Dr. Flint plays the fool while she watches, unseen. (xxviii)

By reversing and turning the received power dynamic upside down, by becoming the observer rather than the observed, indeed, simply by taking control of her own movements through active positioning, Jacobs/Brent' sheds considerable light on realities that her country sought to obscure through practices of rhetoric, law and supposed divine ordinance. In the process, she reproduces and thereby directs her reader's attention to various documents, including letters that were exchanged and news stories that were produced about her, her arch nemesis and his family members, even the bills of sale that characterize her construction as commodity, an imposed hermeneutic that her text absolutely refutes.

While the examples of this re-scripting practice—challenging the symbolic valences of constructing people as property—are legion in *Incidents*, I shall confine my examples to just a few. Recognizing that Dr. Flint left his family in straitened

circumstances when he died, Jacobs/Brent remarks that it was natural for his son-in-law to “make an effort to put me in his pocket” (197), as marketable chattel. Conversely, Jacobs/Brent is very careful with her money, contrasting how her grandmother’s savings, accumulated under painstaking conditions to purchase the liberty of her offspring, were repeatedly confiscated for conspicuous consumption by her mistress. Jacobs/Brent uses her own hard-earned resources to pay for her pathway to freedom, declining to accept any of the meager resources of the Underground Railroad, leaving them instead in service of those in even greater need than she. Here, Jacobs proposes a resistant economics, comparing the greed of the master, his wife and son-in-law with the simultaneously communal and personalized responsibility of the individual escaped slave who manages her own resources for the greater good of the abolitionist movement.

Members of the white population, slave-owners and resisters alike, occasionally find themselves endorsing this revised economy and the changed social metaphysics it posits. For example, Dr. Flint’s sister buys Jacobs/Brent’s grandmother for fifty dollars, in order to maintain her long-standing freedom when Flint places her, to the consternation of the entire community, black and white, on the auction block. A friend of the mistress hides Jacobs/Brent in a store-room and even under the floor boards of her own home, thereby acknowledging the moral weight of this “runaway’s” claims to freedom. Finally, a white ally, Mrs. Bruce, risks a thousand dollar fine and imprisonment when she refuses to be subject to Northern fugitive slave laws.

Jacobs/Brent argues that these regressive laws exposed the tangled genealogies that characterized slavery as a gendered condition, terrible for men, but more terrible for women. Her own enslaved children were fathered by the local Congressman in efforts to refute sexual ownership by Flint. Other long-free runaways would sometimes be forced to reveal similar convoluted sexual histories to spouses and others who need not have known of abuses they endured and would still recall with internalized shame. Of course, the greatest shame falls to those who sexualized the enslaved as a claim to ownership. Mrs. Bruce, to Jacobs/Brent’s chagrin, purchases her friend’s freedom, under which obligation – owing to the penury of her circumstances, Jacobs/Brent labors for the rest of her life, for the betterment of her children’s lives and for those members of the longed-for community her text imagines from the site of her libratory self-incarceration.

In contrast to Jacobs’ extended claustrophobic self-confinement, Pilkington/Garimara reconstructs a long wilderness trek, undertaken not just once, but twice, by her mother, first as a young adolescent in the company of even younger female cousins, Daisy and Gracie, and then again a few years later with babe in

arms, across the unforgiving Australian outback. Too young to accompany her mother and younger sister at the time, Pilkington/Garimara also reproduces the colonialist documents that chart her young mother's progress, thereby affirming her use of embodied Indigenous knowledge through time and space in order to escape and expose the lies perpetrated by the colonizing culture, in its efforts to regulate young Molly's movements. To quote Chief Protector A. O. Neville: "I would like the child to be recovered if no great expense is to be incurred; otherwise the prestige of the Department is likely to suffer" (126). Clearly, the balance in which Molly's safety and well-being is weighed is monetized within an economy of colonial relations that values prestige over "protection."

Like Jacobs/Brent, Pilkington/Garimara also posits an alternative economy, in which security, home and community are invested in networks that involve kindred exchanges among all living beings, human and non-human, and where the city, without bushes and trees, is the alien environment in which one is much more likely to get lost (58). Here, the title of the novel serves to mark the resistant geography Pilkington/Garimara charts. The rabbit-proof-fence, a failed effort to curtail a burgeoning population of colonially-introduced fauna is, according to the novel, "a typical response by the white people to a problem of their own making" (109). One unintended consequence is that the "rabbit proof" fence provides young Molly, and the cousins and daughter she willfully shepherds to safety, with a hidden-in-plain-sight map home. The girls make use of large rabbit burrows on both sides of the fence as hiding places, and the rabbits themselves become a reliable source of food, roasted in the covert fires the girls permit themselves along the way. Meanwhile, the girls refuse to be contained by colonialist restraints, choosing instead to affirm the values of a culture that the colonial empire could not begin to understand, owing to its dependence on depreciating those it would disenfranchise to feed the exploitive power of an evolving nation-state in the globalizing economy.

In Akpan's work, the clutches of globalizing capital have so intensified the survival stakes in neocolonial zones of indifference that brother and sister are held captive, not by officials or slave-owners, but by an uncle, Fofu Kpee, who plans to "fatten," train, and turn them over to child sex traffickers in due course. The novella begins with a warning that brings affective connections and the globalizing economy into direct conflict: "Selling your child or nephew could be more difficult than selling other kids" (39). Unprepared for the harshness of this process, Fofu Kpee shares his delight with the children when he begins to receive material benefits for his promised disloyalties, including a motorcycle (*zokekeke*), electronics, cash and food. Eventually, Fofu Kpee relents, recognizing that he has

betrayed his own humanity in the betrayal of these filial children. He comes to this realization in a context where structurally imposed poverty is preached as “a curse from Satan” (60), which can be “broken” by faith and generous donations to a patriarchal church left behind by colonialist missionaries.

Kotchickpa and Yewa, raised by evidently loving parents, continually accept encroachments on their persons and spaces, in efforts to extend respect to the adults in their lives and to honor the family name, as they have been trained to do. Slowly, the reader follows the torturous psychic effects of emotional and physical abuse that mount as Kotchickpa and his sister attempt to understand what is happening in the relationships with this new “family” of adults, all precursors to the sexual violations planned for them both. Kotchickpa marks this diabolical form of learning through a series of dreams and imagined futures that are invariably crushed under his dawning awareness of the gravity of their situation: a promise of reunion with the siblings’ parents is converted to the “kindness” of the “NGO” “social workers,” whom he comes to recognize as traffickers in affectionate disguise; hope of Fofó’s recovery from a violent disciplinary beating—delivered when he tries to rescue the children from the trap he has helped to set for them—turns to horror when Kotchickpa overhears his uncle’s body being dumped in a shallow grave behind the house in the dead of night; the dream of escape with his sister becomes an enduring loss for them both.

Lauren Berlant would call this hopeful orientation toward the future a form of cruel optimism: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (94). What is most painful here is that Kotchickpa’s imagined futures might be possible, were it not for the affective indifferences and material disadvantages perpetrated by neo/colonialist systems, constantly undoing possibilities for any shared ethic of equitable loving care.

In fact, a number of Kotchickpa’s cruelly optimistic fantasies turn out to be connected to false performances of professionalism, as distorted by the extreme conditions under which the events in this novella take place. In yet another unsettling of the *Bildungsroman*, adults in *Fattening for Gabon* perform shadow versions of career scripts in order to enlist the children’s cooperation with their schemes: Big Guy is a dishonest immigration official who tells the children he is subverting the machinations of an always already corrupt government by preparing them to be shipped in cargo containers to their “new” life abroad; the “NGO” workers would not be able to pose successfully as social workers to these children, were it not for the ways the military/non-profit/industrial complex is increasingly¹¹ bound to the hegemonic operations of global capital; a “man of the

cloth” refers to the children who have enriched their uncle through the collusion of prominent villagers as a “blessing;” and finally, there is the teacher, who “generously” adds calories to the children’s diets, when their sauna-like barracks begin to take their toll. Every one of these “professionals” knows the future that awaits Kotchikpa and Yewa, and all are complicit in its unfolding. Like Jacobs/Brent, the children resist commodification through these false performances, which satirize the “helper” roles mobilized by neo/colonialism. Kotchikpa refers, for example, without irony, to his initial meeting with sex traffickers as his “first contact with an NGO” (77). This reversal of the model of the *Bildungsroman*, in which adults “mentors” become betrayers of children, reveals the corruption at the heart of neo/colonialisms. In this upside-down process of becoming, any promise by a treacherous adult becomes a threat, one more interpersonal micro effect of the manufactured macro international debt crisis.

At one point, Kotchitka and Yewa are introduced to children recently recruited to the pipeline of trafficking experience, Antoinette from Togo and Paul from northern Nigeria (88), (obviously not their real names, either). Kotchikpa, renamed Pascal, expresses astonishment and consternation when young Paul, who has been brought into this so-called “family” only six days prior, begins to cry and vomits the excessive food he wishes to decline, all over his shoes. Antoinette, only four days into her “training,” responds to a stern look from her new “Papa” with fear, indications that these two children, with no uncle to “fatten” them, have already been heavily disciplined. The nature of what that discipline might have entailed is revealed when, one evening, in the stifling heat that Fofu has created by closing off all ventilation in his home (to simulate the sweltering conditions of a transport container on the deck of an ocean freighter), he disrobes before the children to deliver his lesson, meant to normalize their imminent exposure to adult sex. Kotchikpa observes that, “He looked like a man who had stolen from the open market and was about to be stoned” (116). The comment, made once again without irony by an innocent boy who loves his uncle, is nonetheless prescient.

The children are aware that something is amiss when their uncle, well into their “training” proffers his penis for touching, invites the children to touch themselves and asks “Or you want touch white man, Mary, huh?” Of course, they do not. To his credit, in the end, Fofu finds himself as traumatized by this performance as the children are. This deep violation of intergenerational trust brings him to his senses. He recognizes that “Riches no be everything” (135). As a result, Fofu chooses a different path. He ceases wearing the fancy clothes and shoes he acquired as an advance on the sale of his kin (133), and proudly opens the windows to the fresh

air he has forbidden, punching crude ventilation holes into the walls, near the ceiling of his home (121). He realizes, at last, that he cannot take the children to Gabon, as promised. His efforts, however, to rescue them by fleeing on his beloved *zokokee* come to naught. He is captured by men who have been surveilling the house and subsequently beaten within an inch of his life. His assailants promise the children they will take Fofu to hospital (151), but as Kotchikpa later learns, their plan was always simply to finish him off.

Kotchikpa's awareness of the deplorable nature of the plight he shares with his sister grows beside that of his uncle. He slowly comes to understand that he is surrounded by treacherous adults who have learned precisely how to lie to imaginative children, and to their complicit relatives, for their own reasons. Yewa, only five years old, also loses trust for others, having already been gender-trained to recognize that she must endure multiple betrayals, from teasing to much worse, especially among the boys and men around her. She even learns to distrust Kotchikpa, who has adopted the same paternalistic attitude toward her that they have both come to expect in all of the adults they meet after departing their home village. When she suspects that Kotchikpa has been in on the plan to sell her to traffickers, she tells him that he is no longer her brother, a conviction from which he cannot dissuade her (149). Kotchikpa decides to "protect" his much younger sister from betraying their chances to get away, by not telling her about his escape plans until the last possible moment. As a result, he leaves her woefully unprepared when the opportunity arises. A child raised on attachment to people and places cannot abandon them so easily, even when living under prolonged duress, for the unknown. The text closes on a critical moment in which Kotchikpa tries to push Yewa out of a narrow window before he is forced to flee, in desperation, by himself. As discovery looms, Kotchikpa leaps into razor sharp brambles and, despite his injuries, runs madly away. The adult writing voice, who presents this story as memory, admits that he has never outrun his sister's wailing.

That keening wail (Akpan, 172), accompanied by self-inflicted wounds among family members left behind in Australia's Jigalong (44-45), and borne through years of secretive silence by Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent and her children (108, 114, 119, 139, 141, 156), forms the intermittent melodious line that confirms a counter-topography of attachment and connection beneath empire's disturbing and violent disjunctions. *Incidents* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* deploy the conventions of life-writing to make their cases. They attend to disrupted affective networks, which re-emerge in the Underground Railroad and among the sometimes helpful strangers who assist the Aboriginal girls as they trek across the Australian outback. While Akpan's tale is fictionalized, the novella's close emphasizes the ties that bind

Kotchikpa and Yewa in their loneliness for one another. Akpan's novella is so far removed from the hopeful pattern of the *Bildungsroman* that it is read by Ndlovu as a "funeral oration" (77) and by Vambe as an illustration of "how predatory the African extended family has become" under neo/colonial deprivations (113). Vambe goes on to suggest that Yewa is summarily raped by the guard as a punishment for her brother's escape. This apparent over-reading collapses the space and time between siblings' separation and Yewa's immanent sale into the child sex trade, where presumably her unspoiled maidenhead would fetch best price. I would argue that Akpan offers Kotchikpa's final agonized declaration of an uninterrupted connection between the siblings as a way for the reader to extend a wish for Yewa's safety, perhaps even toward ameliorative action.

A counter-topographical reading across these texts reveals how complex social traumas arise from situated but recurring forms of intergenerational violence. At the same time, cross-textual reading can illuminate potentials for new solidarities. Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent eventually saves her children by hiding near them, until she and they make their respective escapes north. Molly Kelly preserves her links to Jigalong and her tribal community by refusing colonialist literacies and numeracies (xii), and remains available to her colonially educated daughter, Nugi/Doris, when she reappears. Kotchikpa cannot abandon the connection to Yewa, whether or not he ever sees her again. The ideological, temporal and geographical distances bridged by these narrow escapes from dominating indifference, re-chart the potentialities of collective memory, needling readers toward what Sue Campbell would call a redistributed "ethics of awareness" (45).

Capacities for affection and connection persist through all of the resistant liminal spaces mapped by these texts. Jacobs' autobiographical account of her long isolation grounds her dream of a "hearthstone of my own, however humble . . . for my children's sake far more than for my own" (201). While she never achieves that dream, her tiny hiding space legitimizes her quest for freedom as she projects a vision of belonging and home as the primary condition of inclusive citizenship, through her account. Mark Rifkin argues that Jacobs uses her dream of a safe household "to register the racist dynamics of government policy as well as to envision the local and material forms that a national commitment to racial justice might take" (94). "Home" is also the destination sought by Molly Kelly and her cousins, Daisy and Gracie. The vast expanse of outback they cross frames the connection to mother, community and home in a model of kinship that includes active engagement with the land. Meanwhile, time shapes the interstitial context that is conjured in Akpen's fiction, a sibling connection both broken and stretched to the duration of a lifetime.

These narratives of intergenerational violence work to undermine neo/colonialist processes of infantilization among subaltern and dominant groups, by emphasizing affective distances and proximities across developmental childhood experiences. Adrian Knapp argues that “[e]specially when the child narrator cannot make sense of what he or she experiences” the reader is interpolated to support “literature’s potential for (self) enfranchisement” (Knapp 3). The narrow escapes these authors present unravel the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* in order to imagine forms of self-enfranchisement that are mutually accountable, even at great distances and over extended periods of time, across difficult life circumstances and intersectionally gendered lives. Jacobs/Brent acquires many friends along her escape route and preserves the connections with her children and loved ones, while inviting white women into mutual feminist accountabilities through her autobiography. Pilkington/Garimara does reconnect with her mother, though baby Annabelle vanishes into the stolen generations. Kotchikpa loves his sister, Yewa, even in her absence, while *Fattening for Gabon* delivers their emblematic story into everyday lives across the globe. Humans are inter-subjective beings, bound to one another and our environments by invisible contouring lines that, while they may be violated to shore up corrupt neo/colonialisms, need not be used for such nefarious purposes. The narrow escapes reviewed in this paper imply that commitments to mutual becoming could guide us toward greater affective accountabilities and, therefore, deeper investments in reciprocal social justice.

Notes

¹ Orlando Patterson uses the term “natal alienation,” in *Slavery and Social Death*, to emphasize the concomitant severing of intergenerational birth relations and enforced geographic displacement common to processes of enslavement and colonization.

² Frigga Haug introduced the term “memory work” to feminist qualitative research in the late 1980s, drawing on skills developed through consciousness-raising practices. Participants draw on comparative memories in order to investigate the lived effects of power dynamics which may not appear as immediately evident in an individuated account, but which become recognizable in the context of multiple related experiences. Thus, for example, women and girls who suffered a sense that they were somehow isolated in their experiences of sexual assault began to understand and name what is now known as “rape culture,” a statistically significant tendency toward sexual violence under patriarchal social conditions, both within and beyond familial contexts.

³ I borrow this term from Grewal and Kaplan’s book *Scattered Hegemonies*, an important intervention in feminist theory which undoes monolithic constructions of patriarchal systems to emphasize their distributed and diverse, if mutually implicated, characteristics.

⁴ In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty invites feminist critics to refuse homogenizing constructions of “third world” women and nations by emphasizing the

heterogeneity of persons and places. She reminds readers from dominant global social locations that privileged access to the means of mediated projection does not constitute what may be perceived as “majority” status. Therefore, she encourages us to remember that the so-called “third” world represents “two thirds” of the planet’s population.

⁵ In her article, “The Loophole of Retreat,” Miranda A. Green-Barteet examines the use of interstitial space in Jacobs’s *Incidents* to empower the launch of provisional libratory identities, both for Linda Brent and for readers of the text. Diane Detournay, Marion Traub-Werner and Richa Nagar suggest that contemporary childhoods combine “the global and the intimate,” so that “social development is shaped by the imposed economic restructuring of their communities, texturing capitalist development with the interstitial practices of everyday life” (487). This paper draws on these constructions of the liminal, as contested and appropriated by protagonists of all three texts examined, to emphasize the process of youthful becoming as a context that can invest histories of social trauma with a learning spirit that helps to heal.

⁶ “Slavocracy” refers to the class of slave owners and slavery advocates who supported and elevated their own social status through plantation culture in the American South up to and during the American Civil War.

⁷ In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agemben turns his attention to the zones of indistinction which mark bio political sites at which “techniques of individualization and totalizing procedures converge” (11).

⁸ David Rousset, a survivor of Buchenwald, coined the term “concentrationary universe” to describe the ways that individual and collective consciousness are impacted by relentless forms of abuse and violence. Growing up under conditions in which concentrationary practices become “normative” provides common ground for the narratives examined here.

⁹ Political philosopher Virginia Held argues in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006) that: “I now think that caring relations should form the wider moral framework into which justice should be fitted” (71).

¹⁰ Tonya Davidson, Ondine Park and Rob Shields have recently edited a collection entitled *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire and Hope*. Like previous collections on affective politics, it builds upon the work of gender, social science and cultural studies scholars who consider how the bio-politics of autonomic responses, operating at the level of the in/voluntary and across persons, can influence individual capacities to re-imagine collective pasts and futures in order to engage more constructively across differences. This “affective turn,” to borrow the title of another informative collection edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough, points to new configurations of bodies, technology, matter, time and space in open systems that cannot necessarily be presumed to be equilibrium seeking.

¹¹ In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, INCITE! The Women of Color against Violence Collective interrogate the impact of professionalization processes on poverty reduction when they are supported by funding mechanisms that reproduce the socio-economic interests of dominant globalizing forces.

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