

# **Narrative Enablement: Constructions of Disability in Contemporary African Imaginaries**

by

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines depictions of disability in selected African films, novels and memoirs. Central to the thesis is the concept of narrative enablement, which is discussed as a property that texts have for enabling the recognition of disability by the reader or viewer. In the thesis, I investigate the ways in which narrative enablement manifests in the texts.

The motivation for the study comes from the recognition of several trends in current literary disability studies. Firstly, the study attempts to expand the theoretical base of current literary disability studies, which consists of ideas formed from a narrow epistemic archive. Similarly, the study also recognises that scholarship in the field mostly relies on a limited canon of texts, almost wholly drawn from the Western world. This study therefore allows a glimpse at an under-acknowledged archive of disability representation, which is then used to suggest the possibility of alternative ways of understanding disablement on the African continent and globally.

The first chapter is meant as an entry point into some of the complex lives depicted in the thesis. In this chapter, I explore the intersection that the texts draw between disability and masculinity, illustrating the way this intersection evokes questions about how we understand the relationship between the two concepts. In the second chapter, I examine the way socio-political violence on the continent is represented as a cause of both disablement and disenabling. This chapter is an exploration of how disability is enmeshed with other social realities in people's lives. The term disenabling is employed in order to capture the presentation of disablement amidst various forms of violent oppression. As it is portrayed in the majority of the texts studied in the thesis, disablement is a factor of social attitudes. My third chapter examines how these texts create dis/ability zones, areas where the reader/viewer witnesses the fluidity of socially constructed disablement in particular societies. As it is portrayed in the texts, and discussed in the thesis, this zone is a space where disabled characters encounter the ableist world. It is a space that allows the destabilization of entrenched notions about disability, and consequent recognition of disabled characters. The most explicit manifestation of narrative enablement occurs through creative intervention, which is the focus in the fourth chapter. In this chapter, I examine the role of various forms of creativity as they are enacted by the characters, arguing that they are manifestations of the characters making use of narrative enablement. In the texts, the disabled characters use

unique modes of storytelling – not exclusively verbal – to narrate their story, but also to assert their belonging to particular familial, cultural, as well as national worlds.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek uitbeeldings van gestremdheid in geselekteerde films, romans en memoirs uit Afrika. Die konsep van narratiewe bemagtiging – ‘n konsep wat ondersoek word as ‘n kapasiteit van tekste wat die erkenning van gestremdheid bemoontlik vir die leser of kyker – staan sentraal in hierdie studie. In my tesis ondersoek ek die maniere waarop narratiewe bemagtiging in die tekste manifesteer.

Die beweegrede vir hierdie studie kom uit die realisering van verskeie strominge in kontemporêre letterkundige gestremdheidstudies. In die eerste plek onderneem hierdie studie die taak om die teoretiese basis van huidige literêre gestremdheidstudies, wat bestaan uit idees wat op hul beurt uit ‘n enge epistemiese argief gevorm is, uit te brei. Op soortgelyke wyse erken die studie dat akademiese navorsing binne hierdie studieveld meestal berus op ‘n relatief klein kanon van tekste, feitlik geheel-en-al uit die Westerse wêreld. Hierdie studie bied dus ‘n kyk op ‘n onder-erkende argief van gestremdheidsvoorstellings, wat op sy beurt gebruik word om die moontlikheid van alternatiewe maniere waarop gestremdheid binne Afrika asook wêreldwyd begryp kan word, aan te toon.

Die doel van die eerste hoofstuk is om ‘n intrepunt te skep waardeur sommige van die komplekse ervaringswêreld wat in die tesis ondersoek word, betree kan word. In hierdie hoofstuk ondersoek ek die oorvleuelings tussen gestremdheid en manlikheid wat deur die tekste uitgebeeld word, om sodoende aan te toon dat hierdie oorvleueling vrae oproep in verband met hoe ons die verhouding tussen hierdie twee konsepte kan verstaan. In my tweede hoofstuk ondersoek ek die manier waarop sosio-politieke geweld op die kontinent uitgebeeld word as ‘n oorsaak van gestremdheid sowel as van ontmagtiging. Hierdie hoofstuk ondersoek die wyses waarop gestremdheid verwickeld is met ander sosiale werklikhede in mense se lewens. Die term *disenablement* [hier: ‘ontmagtiging’] word gebruik om die uitbeelding van gestremdheid midde-in verskillende vorme van gewelddadige onderdrukking vas te vang. Soos uitgebeeld in die meeste van die tekste wat in die studie ondersoek word, is gestremdheid ‘n aspek van sosiale houdinge. My derde hoofstuk ondersoek hoe die gekose tekste areas van be/ontmagtiging skep; gebiede waar die leser/kyker die vloeibaarheid van sosiaal-gekonstrueerde ontmagtiging in spesifieke gemeenskappe waarneem. Soos uitgebeeld in die tekste en soos wat die studie die saak bespreek, is hierdie zone ‘n gebied waarbinne gestremde persone die bemagtigde wêreld ervaar. Dit is ‘n area waarbinne die versteuring van vasgelegde konsepte van gestremdheid, en gevolglike erkenning van gestremde persone, kan

plaasvind. Die mees eksplisiete ontplooiing van narratiewe bemagtiging gebeur deur middel van skeppende intervensies, wat die fokus vorm van my vierde hoofstuk. In hierdie hoofstuk ondersoek ek die rol wat gespeel word deur verskillende vorme van kreatiwiteit soos beoefen deur die karakters, in die loop van my argument dat hierdie skeppingsvorme voorbeelde is van hoe narratiewe bemagtiging plaasvind. In die tekste gebruik die gestremde karakters unieke metodes van vertelling – nie uitsluitlik verbaal nie – om hulle verhale te vertel, maar ook om aan te toon dat en hoe hulle aan partikuliere familiale, kulturele en nasionale wêreld behoort.

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## Introduction: Enabling New Conversations on Disability

“The crippled veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother, ‘Resign yourself to your colour the way I got used to my stump; we’re both victims’.

Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept the amputation.”

(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 107-108)

### Introduction

Frantz Fanon is not as common a presence in disability studies as he is in postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, his words are evoked here as a way of situating this study at a particular crossroads. Fanon’s citation (above) from the film *Home of the Brave* is an illustration of a demand for recognition. The refusal to “accept the amputation” or “to adopt the humility of the cripple” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 107) is a refusal of any attempt to demarcate one’s identity, to accept definition on the basis of one’s colour or one’s disability alone. The images evoked by Fanon’s words are important as a way of introducing the focus of this thesis. For me, the statement captures not denial of the impairment of the body, but more importantly, the refusal of any lessening of one’s human stature or dignity on the basis of a ‘different’ appearance. But first, a small tale from the Internet.

There was a small furore of activity recently on one of the many online academic forums for discussing disability. This was in reaction to an article which had appeared on the website of *The Guardian*, listing “The top 10 books about disability”.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, the list consisted of Western classics that anybody in the field of disability studies is familiar with, among them Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. The reaction to the list was just as predictable, although not on the grounds I had expected. Commentators were disappointed that the majority of titles listed were authored by non-disabled persons and could therefore not truly be representative experiences of disability. My own reaction, on the other hand, was one of muted shock that a person would call his list “The top 10 books about disability” without realizing that all of these texts were penned by white authors and featured, almost exclusively, white disabled characters.

This list is representative of an attitude that has long existed in literary studies – the failure to give adequate recognition to and fully to acknowledge the worth of non-Western (particularly

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/03/top-10-books-disability-paul-wilson>

African) literature. This absence is often defended by claims that the producers of such literature do not do enough to disseminate their works to the rest of the world.

Fanon's speaker above points out that he refuses to accept the observer's amputation of his or her being. In a way, this thesis re-enacts this refusal. It is my personal voice against assumptions that there are no worthwhile literary representations of disability outside the Western World. This study seeks to fill this glaring gap in its examination of African creative imaginaries through the lens of disability studies, investigating what these imaginative representations contribute to understandings of disability.

The value accorded to these texts stems from the recognition that, as renowned disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out, "narratives do cultural work [and] frame our understandings of raw unorganised experience, giving it coherent meaning and making it accessible to us through story" ("Shape Structures Story" 122). The chosen stories draw the reader/viewer into the authors' and characters' world, enabling imaginative access to experiences, locations and types of disability within broader and hitherto under- or unrecognized parameters. The scope of these various African narratives is broad, since (as María Pía Lara argues):

[a]s agents of cultural contact, narratives work across the boundaries of their own culture, as well as of those cultures that incorporate them. They engage public opinion in a continual process of dissolving, reshaping, expanding or transgressing boundaries that have been drawn at various levels of cultural socialization. (*Moral Textures* 152)

Lara usefully draws attention to the capacity of narratives to affect thought within their own cultures as well as outside them. With this in mind, I chose to use the selected texts to illustrate the way in which narratives about disability from Africa have the potential to destabilise some entrenched assumptions concerning disability and to provide alternative ways of conceiving this range of phenomena.

To rephrase Fanon, therefore, this thesis is part of a refusal of the amputation of non-Western literature from the discourse of disability studies. A selection of eleven texts has been marshalled to speak out against this silence regarding representations of disability in the non-Western – specifically, the African – context. The selection was influenced by a consideration of the variety afforded by differences in geographical location (within the African continent) and genre, which permits an examination of the representation of disability in different narrative modes. The study examines depictions of disability in these

texts, focusing on characterisation, style, and socio-cultural contexts. This approach allows for an investigation of how the creative works demonstrate and perform what I term textual and contextual enablement of the disabled body within particular social environments.

The texts are from a range of contexts, which can themselves be seen as disabling.<sup>2</sup> For example, John Miles's novel *Deafening Silence* (1997) and Ramadan Suleman's film *Zulu Love Letter* (2004), while both primarily focusing on deafness, also centre on apartheid discrimination against blacks in South Africa. Ousmane Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987) also highlights racist discrimination, but this time in colonial Senegal. Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010), Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* (2005) are novels that highlight the disabling effects of war on individuals and society, as well as the ubiquity of armed conflict in many parts of the continent. Selected texts further include Sembène's classic film, *Xala* (1975), as well as its novel version (1976) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), a novel by Sudanese author Leila Aboulela, which depicts the life-changing experiences of a young man disabled through a diving accident. Texts from the life writing genre included here are Leslie Swartz's *Able-Bodied* (2010), Musa E. Zulu's *The Language of Me* (2004) and William N. Zulu's *Spring Will Come* (2005).

Altogether, the chosen texts depict different levels and forms of incapacity in diverse African settings and highlight the significance of context in definitions and negotiations of disability; while offering opportunities for commentary on the experiential and metaphoric depictions of disability across the genres (fiction and non-fiction) and media (literature and film), as well as examples of individual and social (re-)adjustment. Though Sembène's *Xala* (both film and novel) and *Camp de Thiaroye* are older texts, they occupy a special position in the African literary and cinematographic canon, being among the earliest African texts to bring disability into focus. Despite this, the texts have not been analysed through the lens of disability studies. Including them in this study is an acknowledgement of their inauguration of disability as a focal issue in more recent African writing and film.

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<sup>2</sup> Patriarchal societies are an example of such disabling societies, where being female and disabled can create an extra tier of marginalisation. In a way, this also stands as a form of disablement partially responsible for the dearth of the female voice in authorship. This is also reflected in the unfortunate gender imbalance in the representation of disability in the African creative imagination, both at the level of authorship (few female authors/directors dwell on the subject of disability) as well as characterisation (most disabled characters are male).

This is by no means a complete list of African creative texts that depict disablement. Representations of disability start from the vast wealth of oral literature that exists on the continent, with examples ranging from the Yoruba deity Obatala's role as the creator of disability to oral historical records of Sundiata Keita of Mali. For the present exercise, however, the focus is on more contemporary texts in written form and film, recognising the way such texts contain influences of this folklore background. A number of texts have been omitted from the study, including Oscar Pistorius's *Blade Runner* (2009); Natalie du Toit's biography, *Tumble Turn* (2006) (by Tracey Hawthorne); Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* (1996); Jane Kaberuka's *Has God Forgotten Me? The Cry of an Accident Victim* (2002); and Esther Owuor's *My Life as a Paraplegic* (1995). The first two, though detailing the experiences of disabled characters, focus almost exclusively on their sporting careers and less on other aspects of their lives. The role of Miriro, the deaf and mute female character in Hove's novel, is too tightly interwoven with other characters to fit into the current analysis and her (posthumous) voice does not feature extensively in this text. Similarly, Kaberuka and Owuor's texts are also excluded since they hardly present details of the narrators' lives separate from their hospitalization and religious faith. Also left out is Kobus Moolman's *Tilling the Hard Soil* (2010), a collection of short stories, poems, and extracts from longer works by disabled writers from South Africa. The careful selection of texts also necessitated the omission, on grounds of relevance and centrality of the disabled character, of other films for analysis in the dissertation than those discussed here – including Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1985); Djibril Diop Mambéty's *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil* (1998); Ousmane Sembène's *Guelwaar* (1993) and Saadi Jilaani's *Khorma (la betise)* (2002). However, I believe the selection of texts analysed in this thesis contains a representative selection of presently available material for my discussion, in the sense that they are apt illustrations of narrative enablement. The material helpfully indicates possible ways of looking at certain aspects of African history anew, with a focus on the role of the disabled body in representation. These texts therefore facilitate a fresh look at familiar topics such as colonial violence and racism. Most importantly, they illustrate how the representation of disability in literary imaginaries can be read as forms of narrative enablement, a term I explain presently.

This study is situated in the tradition of some recent scholarship on disablement in African imaginative writing. Considering such writing is a departure from the trend of focusing only on Western-produced texts, a tendency which, as illustrated below, has also led to the burgeoning of Western-produced theories and assumptions about disability and its

representation. As a result, it is not unusual for scholars simply to uncritically apply the theories of Western origin to the developing world, a practice that has been challenged by a number of scholars. For instance, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray criticise the manner in which “Disability Studies problematically transports theories and methodologies developed within the Western academy to other global locations, paying only nominal attention to local formations and understandings of disability” (19). Similarly, Helen Meekosha observes that “[t]here has been a one-way transfer of ideas and knowledge from the North to the South in [disability studies]” (668). One of the main faults with existing theory in the field is “the neglect of racial thinking [which] results in a problematic universalizing tendency that fails to account for differences in treatment across racial communities” (Snyder and Mitchell 111). Noticing this neglect has led to a more focused examination of intersections between disability studies and postcolonial studies. This is the kind of work that Pushpa Naidu Parekh (2007) and Anita Ghai (2012) are engaged in. Parekh focuses on Indian postcolonial cultural works as presenting crossover points for disability and postcolonial concerns. Similarly, Ghai’s work is a remarkable attempt to employ postcolonial scholarship as a way of enriching disability studies, applying the resulting hybrid approach to a reading of disabled characters in Indian film. In “(Post)colonising Disability” (2007), Mark Sherry sounds an important warning to scholars to be wary of “the rhetorical connection commonly made between various elements of [conventional or dominant postcolonial studies] (colonization, exile, diaspora, apartheid, slavery, and so on) and experiences of disability” (10), because addressing the lives of disabled characters in African contexts requires greater recognition of the circumstances of the postcolonial present than of the colonial past. For Shaun Grech, the predominantly Western-oriented nature of disability studies makes it “complicit in the neocolonising of the Southern space” (“Majority World” 52). The work of these scholars aids in expanding entrenched (Western) notions of disability, and illustrates the unique nature of disability in the developing world.

Besides numerous articles examining intersections between the fields of literature and disability studies, there are a few lengthier projects that provide valuable insights into this intersection. Of particular note is Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007), which attempts to rope postcolonial fiction to disability studies while simultaneously proposing a theory of disability representation. However, as Clare Barker and Stuart Murray rightly observe, Quayson’s book falls a bit short of being representative of such an intersection, since it does not explore “the questions of how postcolonial cultures per se represent” (225), and

one might add, contribute to, contemporary debates on disability. Julie Nack Ngué's *Critical Conditions: Refiguring Bodies of Illness and Disability in Francophone African and Caribbean Women's Writing* (2007) is one example of a work that does highlight cultural contributions to notions of disability. Ngué examines the way particular narratives challenge dominant Western formulations of normative health and normalcy. Taking a similar approach is Clare Barker's *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (2011), which examines the depiction of disablement among children in the postcolonial world.

There are various reasons for this pursuit, ranging from the recognition of the dearth of studies of disability as depicted in the literature of the postcolonial world to the need to revoke the assumed universality of Western produced epistemologies of disability.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that the current study can make a contribution to this bustling exercise, which attempts to enlarge and add colour to the largely monochromatic field of literary disability studies. In other words, postcolonial spaces provide the opportunity to further open up what Chris Bell (2006) sees as "white" disability studies.

### **Narrative enablement**

I began this introduction by calling the study a rejection of the amputation of African texts from literary disability studies. The more ambitious aim of the study, however, is to showcase these texts as works of narrative enablement, reflected in the title of the thesis. This study sees the text itself as an avenue to or a facilitator of enablement within as well as beyond the texts. This is primarily a literary project, and therefore it aims to emphasise the uniqueness of representations of disability. Besides the written text and the film, narrative is here understood as potentially existing in other, non-verbal artistic forms such as paintings, beadwork, and photography. The study reveals how the narratives studied here variously create enabling spaces and discourses.

Narrative enablement cannot be pinned down to a single feature in the texts, but is a phenomenon that occurs at both intra- and extra-textual levels. A helpful way of approaching the concept is by paying attention to the various narratives embedded within each single narrative. In this regard, Gérard Genette's work on the story-within-a-story has proved very

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<sup>3</sup> The special issues of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.3 (2010) and *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* 4 (Summer 2007) are relevant examples of growing scholarly interest in non-Western representations of disablement.

useful. In *Narrative Discourse*, he helpfully illustrates how the concept of “narrative” can refer to three different aspects of the story: the story itself, with focus on the content, the form of the story, and thirdly, the act of storytelling as performance (Genette 25-26). This description fits in with my notion of narrative as an enabling act. Firstly, taken as “the narrative statement” (Genette 25), the chosen texts are enabling creations in the very process of highlighting conditions of disability in literature and film. Of course, as Lennard Davis observes, there is hardly a work of literature that does not feature some form of disablement (*Enforcing Normalcy* 44). In the texts under study, however, disability is not relegated to the margins of the plot, but the examples and experiences of disabled characters, and other people’s responses to them, are featured centrally. Seen for its formal qualities, narrative is also examined as enabling in the way that disabled characters emerge as voiced storytellers rendering their own narratives through unique and chosen forms. Additionally, enablement comes about in the very act of telling the story (by both the characters and the authors), as a form of agency, acquiring a voice and making a claim for recognition. Enablement is achieved in the way these narratives, to borrow Lara’s words, “[enter] into the public sphere and struggl[e] for public recognition” (*Moral Textures* 3). The notion of recognition is helpful in clarifying the idea of narrative enablement as it is formulated in this thesis. I use the term narrative enablement to indicate that which happens in the interaction between the text and its readership/viewership. This is the arena in which enablement (recognition) occurs; the public sphere where attitudes are formed. Narrative enablement can therefore be detected in the narrative content, in the act of narration (agency), through the formal qualities of creativity, and in the transformative potential of the text (in the public sphere). This concept is delineated more fully in the course of the dissertation and by means of appropriate examples from the texts, which are analysed in detail.

The target of this thesis is therefore, primarily, the reader of fiction and the cinematographic audience. Even though ‘enablement’ as I employ the term initially denotes conditions or moments of agency exercised by disabled characters in the texts or by their authors by means of the texts, it occurs also in the (actual or potential) reader or viewer of these texts who can (by means of encountering the texts) be equipped to discover or learn more about disability on the African continent and, hence, expand their (general) understanding of conditions and contexts of disability. In their portrayal of disabled characters, the texts make claims for recognition in various ways. This is evident, for instance, in the reaffirmation of the disabled character’s masculinity in Musa Zulu’s *The Language of Me*, as well as in Delia Jarrett-

Macauley's empathetic portrayal of traumatized ex-child soldiers in *Moses, Citizen & Me*. Such characters strive to assert their humanity in the face of social environments that may want to render them invisible or inaudible. Through their depictions, the authors of these texts have made the important step of enabling the recognition of the disabled person's presence in society.

### **The genres of enablement**

So far, my reference point has mainly been written literature. However, the discourse of mainstream disability studies remains equally ignorant of non-Western representations of disability across other genres. The examples of African creative texts studied in this thesis are drawn from three genres – the novel, the memoir and film. In spite of this clear identification of genres, the structure of the thesis is not based on distinct genre classification. Instead, my approach is to take the texts primarily as narratives of disability, rather than as belonging to particular genres. This has the merit of enabling an approach focused on the narratives, while also permitting occasional comparison between various elements of the different texts.

This thesis subscribes to the notion that film and literary narratives offer ways of acquiring and modifying knowledge about the world, validating the suggestion that “narratives can be seen as instruments and expressions of learning” (Lara, *Moral Textures* 103). The texts marshalled in the study are windows into the African continent, and help advance the argument that the continent is not one homogeneous entity, but instead comprises various environments and people. This is related to what Edward Said calls the “worldliness” of the text, which emanates from its being connected to the very world which makes up its subject. As Said points out, “texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society – in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly” (35). This worldliness is informed by various factors, including socio-cultural contexts, political environments that the text is a part of. Focusing on disability further emphasises the fact that these texts draw from particular socio-cultural epistemologies. They therefore depict disability as a phenomenon that is not a fixed identity, but rather as one that exists “as a shifting health state on a continuum of *culturally-mandated* health and bodily norms” (Ngue 21, my emphasis). The cultural element in the depiction of disability mentioned here helps to indicate how definitions of disability may differ across cultures. In the words of prominent disability studies scholar David Bolt, “[w]hichever models [of disability] we invoke, be they tragic, charitable, religious, individual, medical,

social or affirmative, cultural factors cannot be ignored” (“Social Encounters” 293). With the examples of the selected texts, this thesis illustrates the importance of these cultural factors in defining and understanding disability.

The memoirs included in the thesis – *Spring Will Come*, *The Language of Me*, and *Able-Bodied* – bring something unique to the study through their authorship by disabled people or by people closely related to disabled persons. These memoirs (to apply one scholar’s words):

are about the process of learning to live with an unexpected impairment – often not just of its medical and practical demands on daily life but also of the author’s realization of his or her changed social status and, sometimes, changed perceptions. Such accounts provide insight not only into the everyday material barriers encountered by a disabled person but also into what it takes, practically and subjectively, to ‘do’ disability well. (Scully, “Moral Bodies” 26)

Jackie Leach Scully’s observation tempts one to regard the memoir genre as being more ‘authentic’ than its fictional counterpart. However, the inclusion of these memoirs is not meant to suggest the imposition of a hierarchy. Instead, they are recognized – alongside fiction – as equally worthy contributions to the corpus of imaginative writings that have disability as their subject.

If written African representations of disability are generally under-acknowledged in the ‘world’ of disability studies, the same applies to cinematographic depictions. Scholarship on disability in film has been largely based on Western representations, with most scholars agreeing that bodily difference is frequently employed as a literary device for commenting on other social problems (Kriegel, 1987; Norden 1994; Enns and Smit 2001; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Riley 2005). The presentation of disability on the screen serves a number of other functions. For instance, the visual projection of bodily difference provides another manifestation of Quayson’s “aesthetic nervousness” in the sense of the filmmakers’ encoding of disabilities in ways that aim to remove any anxiety that may emanate from the encounter with disability by mostly able-bodied viewers. In some instances, the cinematographic portrayal of the disability allows “an audience to focus on the disability without the awkwardness of staring in public” (Safran 471). This statement emphasizes the point that by creating disabled characters in film, the director essentially offers them for the audience to stare at. In *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson discusses the role of the stare as a meaning-making process between the “starer” and the “staree”. The film medium disrupts that exchange. Similarly to the written text, therefore, the audio-visual medium provides a buffer zone of interpersonal contact between the able-bodied and the

disabled. In the African context, cinema is especially important because it mostly sidesteps the requirement of literacy associated with the written text. It is precisely because of the challenge of prevalent illiteracy that the filmmaker Ousmane Sembène chose to focus on filmmaking over novel writing, realizing that the majority of Africans would find the former medium easier to access (Armes 282; Fofana 58). The representation of disability in film thus has the potential to open up a whole new world to readers and viewers.

In the Hollywood tradition, most depictions of disability are “[t]he safest bets for Oscar gold” (Riley 71), mainly attributed to their appeals to the audience’s pity. In these films, if the disabled character is not presented in stereotypical fashion, he or she is cast in a role that does not affect the flow of the story. A pioneering critic on disability in cinema, Martin F. Norden, observes:

We live in a consumer culture, and we might well argue that disability, like many other imaged subjects, is a commodity. Hollywood filmmakers are trying to “sell” audiences certain images with the assumption that, if the audiences accept it (or at least, don’t protest it too loudly), they will keep buying tickets for more of the same. (“Hollywood Discourse” 24)

Hollywood filmmakers, therefore, usually give the audience the ending they long for, the “recipe of normalcy, injury, recovery” (Riley 25). However, it is not only in the biased depiction of disabled characters that the Hollywood movie industry fails. The misrepresentation of disabled people is further complicated by the politics of the film production process itself, where able-bodied characters have for a long time played the roles of disabled people (Norden, *Cinema* 22). Fortunately, this is now changing in most films, as casting disabled actors to play such roles is recognised as an empowering move.

This thesis, however, is not concerned with Hollywood films, but with African cinematic productions whose narratives are significantly concerned with disability. In the chapters to follow, the study argues that the films are also examples of narrative enablement in their representations of disablement. Historically, most African films have restricted budgets, relying on government assistance or seeking financing from private organisations (Pfaff, “Introduction” 6; McCall 93). Given the numerous African films in existence, tackling a variety of concerns, scholarly work on African film is vast, with most researchers noting the postcolonial reclaiming of African history undertaken by various film directors (e.g. Diawara 1992; Barlet 2000). The reclaiming of African history, for example, is one of several thematic trends in African filmmaking noted by African film scholar Manthia Diawara. Other trends

include “social realist narratives [that] draw on contemporary experiences, and [...] oppose tradition to modernity, oral to written, agrarian and customary communities to urban and industrialized systems, and subsistence economies to highly productive economies” (Diawara 141) as well as “films of historical confrontation that put into conflict Africans and their European colonizers” (Diawara 152). These films reclaim representation of the African from the position of the Other, serving not only a historical function, but asserting the humanity of its subjects. The more recent content of African filmmaking is focused on depicting varied contemporary socio-economic realities of Africa, evoking post-colonial, local realities.

Disability is one of these contemporary realities in and of Africa, and indeed the rest of the world. In the films, disabled characters feature in both leading and supporting roles. Such characters range from the mentally scarred Pays in Sembène’s *Camp de Thiaroye* (1989), the physically disabled Sili Laam in Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *La petite vendeuse de soleil* (1999), to more contemporary figures like the deaf Simangaliso in Ramadan Suleman’s *Zulu Love Letter* (2004). There are also a number of documentary films highlighting the experiences of people with different disabilities on the continent (Devlieger 1998; Nepveux and Beitiks 2010). It is commendable that some scholars within disability studies have initiated the study of representations of disability within African films. Patrick Devlieger and Jori de Coster, for instance, have carried out a semiotic analysis of disability representations, with a focus on “developing an aesthetic appreciation and a content analysis of the way ‘the disabled body’ is portrayed in African films” (Devlieger and de Coster 146). Their work focuses rather emphatically on the aesthetics of filmmaking, at the expense of examining the socio-cultural contexts of the narratives. This is in spite of their acknowledgement of the significance of context in informing definitions of disability within the African context: “In the context of Africa, the contexts of disability are multiple. Cultural systems of thought and practice, the impact of colonialism, and the forces of modernity are all sources of meaning-making” (Devlieger and de Coster 146). This emphasis on context is particularly important for the current study, and provides a basis upon which I examine several themes in the narratives. Equally relevant is Abdou Salam Yaro’s doctoral thesis, in which he devotes considerable time to an examination of the image of the disabled child as represented in African cinema. Regarding disability depictions in African film, he writes:

[E]n recourant au handicap, le cinéma africain se dote d’un autre langage cinématographique qui lui permet d’aborder des sujets pertinents liés à des sociétés post-coloniales: les relations dominant-dominé, que ce soit au sein d’une société patriarcale, d’un gouvernement ou encore sur le plan économique

entre nations riches et pauvres, ces relations donc peuvent être revues et analysées dans des films qui évoquent le handicap.

[Thus, using disability, African cinema acquires another cinematic language that enables it to address pertinent issues related to post-colonial societies: dominant-subordinate relationships. Whether within patriarchal societies, government or between economically rich and poor nations, these relationships can then be reviewed and analysed in films that portray disability] (Yaro 39)

This emerging area of study therefore appears to reveal that although African filmmakers do include disabled characters in their productions, they tend to be a means to ends that the filmmakers consider more relevant to Africans. With a focus on the use of disability as metaphor, Yaro identifies a trend that is not entirely new in disability studies. What the field needs – and indeed what this thesis endeavours to do – is an examination that prioritizes the texts as the primary referent, instead of employing them to confirm pre-existing theoretical postulations and models. This is the optimal approach for communicating the contributions of these texts to the rest of the world, in effect resisting their amputation from the global discourse of disability.

African films have historically taken on the role of countering the misrepresentation of the African continent and its people by the West, providing “an insider’s perspective” (Devlieger and de Coster 147) to realities of the continent. In the films examined in this thesis, the characters are depicted not only in symbolic roles, but also as people deserving recognition from the viewer. The focus on various contexts on the African continent enables an appreciation of how these communities understand disability.

### **Theoretical points of departure**

I see my study as being part of growing scholarship that resists merely confirming existing theory in literary disability studies. The dominant scholarship in the field rests on the foundation of Western literature, and predominantly on assessments of the lives of disabled people in the Global North. This thesis attempts to challenge some of the postulations of such scholarship, highlighting their non-universality, but also to suggest possible advances in thinking about disability and its representation. The texts are therefore not merely clad in disability studies raiment, but instead, challenge the assumed universality of some of the existing theory on the topic.

That being said, one cannot ignore the valuable contributions to the study of representations of disability by various scholars. Particularly relevant to some aspects of this thesis are ideas

from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, contained in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000). This book presents the authors' important argument that disability is usually figured as "prosthesis" in imaginative works. The central argument in the text pertains to the way in which various representations of disability unfailingly employ disability as "a stock feature of representation" and "as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (47). As a result, artists often shy away from depicting the experiential dimension of disability, making it instead "an explicitly complicating feature of their representational universes" (2). Disability is a phenomenon that is part of – and arguably defined by – an ableist world. Therefore, a discussion of disablement has to incorporate some idea of how the non-disabled public regards disabled persons. In this regard, I have made some use of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concepts "normate" and "misfit" in my discussion of interactions between disabled characters and the ableist public. The first concept is one she introduces in her book *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), another indispensable text in the discipline of disability studies. The normate is the ideal, able-bodied figure that is in opposition to deviance. It "designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definite human beings" (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 8). The "misfit" is a more recent coinage, denoting the limited opportunities for the accommodation of disabled persons in a materially ableist-oriented world (Garland-Thomson, "Misfits" 594).

The broad interpretive framework of the thesis relies heavily on the work of María Pía Lara, specifically on her model of recognition, presented in *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (1998). Lara's work has as its primary concern the writing of women, and how such writings have crossed over from the private into the public domain, through what she terms their "illocutionary force". Drawing inspiration from Jürgen Habermas, Lara develops the meaning of this notion as the capacity of narratives to reconfigure justice and the good, through a re-imagination of the public sphere. This illocutionary force, writes Lara, "consist[s] of new ways of conceiving political forms which *have to be imagined before they can be achieved*" (Lara 77, my emphasis). This is the means by which narratives can challenge myths. Their illocutionary force imbues these texts with transformative capability, for they carry the potential to script futures that herald novel conceptions of particular sections of society, ways of thinking that indicate a break from past forms. As she points out elsewhere, however, "illocutionary force" is not exclusive to women's writing, but can also be found in other narratives where the "use of fictional language to describe their own positions points [...] to the successful interaction between moral claims and aesthetic

expressions” (Lara, "Reply" 184). Lara’s insights can be applied to many texts with disability as their subject. Once in the public sphere, such “emancipatory narratives mediate between particular group identities and universalistic moral claims, providing new frameworks that allow those who are not members of the group to expand their own-self conceptions and their definitions of civil society” (Lara, *Moral Textures* 3). The most important part of these narratives is therefore the transformative potential that they possess regarding their effect on the reader/viewer. This transformative process is at the heart of Lara’s model of recognition, which is important for what I postulate as narrative enablement.

As a primarily literary study, parts of the following examination focus on the formal qualities of representation, in particular assessing how these formal features can function as enabling devices used by the writers and filmmakers. In this regard, I employ Bakhtin’s (1975) notion of “heteroglossia” and Gérard Genette’s (1972) discussion of narrative levels respectively in the earlier and later sections of the study. Bakhtin makes the following observation:

Any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents. (276)

The relevance of his thought to the present study derives from the fact that representations of disabled subjects are always infused with particular ideologies and carry the baggage of existing traditions or habits of depiction and response. Bakhtin’s thought can be used to complement Genette’s articulation of diegetic (or narrative) levels in *Narrative Discourse*, where he explores the relationships among embedded narratives. The notion of diegetic levels is a way of conceptualizing the different levels on which narratives may exist in a single narrative. Genette explores the nature of relationships binding these levels. I employ these theoretical ideas in approaching the multiplicity of narratives of disability that occur within the selected texts.

Besides these areas, particular scholarly positions are adopted to a more limited extent in order to better articulate the arguments in specific sections of the thesis. For instance, the discussion of overlaps between disability and masculinity invites an engagement with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In this regard, the work of R. W. Connell (2001) is employed to enrich the analysis. Similarly, the thesis makes occasional use of insights from scholars in the field of life writing, particularly G. Thomas Couser (1997, 2009), and Sidonie

Smith and Julia Watson (2010). The contributions of scholars on intersectionality such as Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) and Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear (2010) also prove helpful in clarifying the various intersections between disability and other markers of identity. In the thesis, my interpretation of the violent contexts is in a large part informed by Fanon's writing on this topic. This contributes to an understanding of the intersection between race and violence in particular contexts. Lastly, in the discussions of African film, I am indebted to the work of various scholars in the discipline, including Manthia Diawara (1992) and Françoise Pfaff (1984, 2004), among other critical voices which allow me to articulate my own position.

### **Defining disability in the African context**

Attempts to define the term 'disability' have generated much debate. It is a term on which even scholars specializing in the field of disability studies do not agree. Part of the complexity of the task comes from the fact that, in the social model, 'disability' is deemed a condition different from 'impairment'. This distinction stems from disciplinary focus on either the individual's anatomy or their placement in society. The term 'impairment' draws attention to bodily difference, seen as "lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body" (Oliver 22), whereas disability is seen as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (Oliver 22). Most modern definitions of disability are variants of the one Michael Oliver provides, emphasising the social aspects of disablement over the bodily impairment. One of the advantages of the social model is that this mode of thinking "mandates barrier removal, anti-discrimination legislation, independent living and other responses to social oppression" (Shakespeare, "Social Model" 216). Although it has its flaws, it remains the ideal model for conceptualising the interaction of disabled people with other people in their societies, which is an important aspect of this study.

However, most of the vocabulary of disability studies scholarship is formed on the basis of an archive of experiences of disability in the developed world. Where studies of disability in the Global South do emerge, they are often characterised by fitting into "a discernible pattern of homogenisation, simplification and generalisation achieved through the alignment of the assumed disability experience in the majority world [developing countries] with that

proposed by Western disability studies” (Grech, "Recolonising Debates" 89). Recent research indicates that conceptions of disability in developing countries may be significantly different from those in the developed world. This has obvious implications for the methods of intervention and rehabilitation that are proposed by aid providers to low income countries. Therefore, even though the field of disability studies is quite well developed in the Global North, care must be taken when exporting its terminologies to other parts of the world. As Ato Quayson observes, “[a]ny attempt to universalize the category ‘disabled’ runs into conceptual problems of the most fundamental sort” (*Calibrations* 101). In their book, *Disability & Culture*, Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Whyte expand on this cautionary point:

The concept of disability itself must not be taken for granted. In many cultures, one cannot be ‘disabled’ for the simple reason that ‘disability’ as a recognized category does not exist. There are blind people and lame people and ‘slow’ people, but ‘the disabled’ as a general term does not translate easily into many languages. (7)

One way out of this apparent quandary is to adopt a position that emphasises “people’s own experiences of what is disabling in their world rather than [...] some universal definition” (Ingstad and Whyte, "Disability Connections" 11). Unique in Ingstad and Whyte’s position is the decision not to restrict themselves to “the conventional prototypes of sensory, motor, and intellectual disability” (Ingstad and Whyte, "Disability Connections" 11). Instead, they prioritize the contexts of research as the main determinants for understanding disablement. This reflects a decision made during the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where delegates agreed that definitions of disability can vary across different countries (Chataika 260). Far from resulting in chaos, this decision permits countries to develop models of intervention and care based on their contexts.

Particularly important is the need to acknowledge various factors, unique to Africa, which are potentially disabling to most people. Such disabling factors include war and poverty, as well as disease. In the poorest of nations on the continent, “[d]isabled people [...] confront barriers to the most basic of human needs (food, health, education, assistive devices, inadequate hard infrastructure and sanitation, remoteness, etc), issues all too irrelevant to the western disability debate” (Grech, "Critical Reflections" 777). To make matters worse, the experience of colonialism means that on the continent, addressing the concerns of disabled persons has never been as pressing a concern as have been other factors such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, racial discrimination, ethnic differences, or development. Tom Shakespeare notes, for instance, that among the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals

(MDGs), disability does not explicitly stand out, even though it is referenced in background documents ("Social Encounters" 279). This is in spite of the fact that the MDGs are mostly targeted towards the world's poorest nations. This illustrates that in the hierarchy of concerns of developing nations, disability does not rank very high.

Given that numerous instances of disability on the African continent (and represented in the texts examined here) are connected to violence, this study pays close attention to kinds of trauma sometimes associated with disability. This is a move which eventually allows for the examination of a sense of loss sometimes associated with disablement. In this turn, I concur that the discipline of disability studies severally evinces

a rigidity and defensiveness in the [...] stance taken by [disability theorists], as if an acknowledgment of damage, or of a need to mourn the loss of an ability that was previously enjoyed, or of lasting, symptomatic effects in excess of some neutral concept of physical difference might discredit the entire discipline and even endanger the subjectivities of its practitioners. (Berger 573)

Beyond the usual emphasis on the social construction of disability, therefore, there is some merit in paying attention to "[c]auses of disability that may be traumatic, and consequences of disability that may be symptomatic of earlier trauma" (Berger 573). I find that this particular slant allows (for example) for a richer reading of Simangaliso and post-apartheid South Africa in *Zulu Love Letter*; the ostracized ex-child soldiers in *Moses, Citizen & Me*; as well as victims of torture in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

With its focus on the African context, this study respects the identification of cultural difference as being a key factor in the understanding of disability. The perception of disability this thesis strives for is one which pays heed to such cultural relativity. It draws from the understanding that "there are issues related to disability that are uniquely African" (Owusu-Ansah and Mji 3) and that can differ according to particular locations, class variations, as well as mytho-religious beliefs, among other factors. This is not a way of essentialising African experience, but rather one of drawing attention to the fact of alternative modes of reading disablement which contribute to broadening and diversifying knowledge of its complexity as a topic and provide access to other (African) forms of it, as 'understandable' experience. Such an understanding draws on what Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell propose as a cultural model of disability (*Cultural Locations* 5), where "[t]he definition of disability must incorporate both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological forces" (*Cultural Locations* 7). The

suitability of such an approach is clear when we consider, for example, the way cultural practice makes the Abuzeid patriarch believe that his disabled son is not worthy of marriage to any woman in *Lyrics Alley*, or the way impotence acquires multiply disabling meanings in *Xala*, or even the way Simangaliso's deafness is regarded as a disability by some people and not by others in *Zulu Love Letter*. When the term 'disability' is used in this thesis, therefore, it is to refer, as Nicole Quackenbush puts it, to a condition that is "a product of society's unwillingness to accept or accommodate bodily/mental difference" (9). As a working definition, this has the merit of capturing the centrality of social context in the construction of disablement. However, I acknowledge that the definition has its shortfalls, for example failing to highlight cultural specificity. To compensate for this the present study is primarily an exercise in the *exemplification*, rather than an attempt at reaching a comprehensive *definition*, of disability within the African context as represented in the chosen texts. Context becomes particularly important in this regard, as one of the key endeavours of the study is to highlight the role of traditional beliefs (where they are evident) in the understanding of disablement – how they contribute to the social exclusion or inclusion of disabled characters.

The present venture should be read as challenging the "glaring dearth of disability-related scholarship by and about disabled people of color" (Bell 278). It is a way of rejecting amputation of African perspectives from the global discourse of disability. The intersectional approach adopted here usefully permits a study of depictions of disability in its entanglement with multiple zones of identity (including marginalized ones), as well as various epistemological frames. The thesis is therefore an attempt to highlight new regions into which disability studies could advance.

### **Description of chapters**

The thesis is divided into four chapters, arranged according to particular focal emphases. This entails that some of the texts are examined more than once, and such an approach permits multiple readings of disablement in the same texts, but also highlights various forms of disablement and enablement.

My first analytical chapter is a discussion of the experiential, focusing on the lived experience of the male disabled character in five texts: South African memoirs *Spring Will Come*, *The Language of Me*, and *Able-Bodied*; Sudanese author Leila Aboulela's novel, *Lyrics Alley* and Nigerian Caine Prize winner Helon Habila's novel, *Measuring Time*. Placing the experiential as the central concern permits me to focus on intersections between disability

and masculinity, with emphasis on the affected characters' feelings concerning their 'different' bodies. Furthermore, in this chapter, I examine modes of agency through which the featured characters counter the ideology of ability through the articulation of specific aspects of their masculinity.

In both colonial and postcolonial Africa, violence is often linked to disablement. In the second chapter, I explore the role of various historical nodes of violence in causing and perpetuating disability on the continent, as depicted in Sembène's filmic take on the Thiaroye massacre of African soldiers in *Camp de Thiaroye*; Miles's 'police novel' *Deafening Silence*; Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* and Jarrett-Macauley's blend of magical realism and historical fiction in *Moses, Citizen & Me*. Focusing on the experiences of these characters, I analyse the manner in which these historical contexts of violence act as disabling and disenabling factors to people on the continent. Yet the texts ultimately illustrate the resilience of the characters' human will to live meaningfully despite all this violence and its consequences.

In chapter three I argue that the selected narratives destabilize certain prevalent constructions of disability by means of their depictions of what I term the dis/ability zone, as an area characterised by the interaction of the disabled characters with the ableist world and ideology. By highlighting the unstable and porous nature of this zone, the chapter indicates how the label of disability can be rendered fluid in African communities. I draw here on the representation of disablement in the celebrated satiric film (and novel) *Xala*; the award winning South African film *Zulu Love Letter* and Jarrett-Macauley's post-civil war novel *Moses, Citizen & Me*.<sup>4</sup>

My central focus in the fourth chapter regards the art forms contained within some of these narratives, which I examine in order to highlight the individual and social functions that these art works serve for the concerned characters. Making reference to creativity displayed in *Spring Will Come*; *The Language of Me*; *Lyrics Alley*; *Zulu Love Letter*; *Moses, Citizen & Me* and *Measuring Time*, I illustrate how, through these texts, the subaltern does not only speak, but is able to articulate himself or herself in forms that sometimes challenge ableist assumptions.

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<sup>4</sup> *Zulu Love Letter* is the recipient of several awards, including the Prix Spécial Union Européenne at FESPACO (2005), the Grand Prize at the 21<sup>st</sup> Mons International Love Film Festival (2005), as well as the Cape Town World Cinema Award (2005).

The final section of the study is a reflection on how the various chapters contribute to the discussion and development of the notion of narrative enablement. In the conclusion, I explore various concepts that have emerged in the course of the study. This concluding move is therefore a suggestion of the possibilities of narrative enablement occurring beyond the sphere of the characters in the texts.

## Chapter 1: Narrating the Experiential: Living With/in Disability

*Mwamuna ali ngati kabudula, amathera moyenda*

[a man is just like a pair of shorts, they both wear out through movement]

(Chewa proverb)

### Introduction

There is a Chewa proverb that most children in Malawi are taught. This proverb – *mako ndi mako usamuone kuchepa mwendo* – literally translates as “your mother is still your mother even if she has a deformed leg” (Chimedza and Peters 424). The moral here is that we must unconditionally love our parents for bringing us into this world and for their care during our childhood. What is more interesting in the proverb, however, is the choice of image. The proverb cautions that one should not love one’s mother less if she has a disability. Attention is drawn to bodily difference as a potential cause of diminished affection towards another. In other words, the proverb appears to acknowledge (and dispute) the supposition that those with ‘abnormal’ bodies do not merit as much affection as the able-bodied, even if they are our direct relations.

Although the proverb is from a particular culture, its moral is drawn from experiences that are common in the contexts of the narratives under study in this chapter. All the texts are set in African countries – South Africa, Egypt, Sudan and Nigeria. In spite of the difference in geographical and temporal location, the texts feature characters with disabilities who invite analysis in terms of the uniqueness *and* similarity of their experiences. All the texts handled in this chapter have male protagonists, a feature which, as mentioned earlier, reflects the shortage of available and suitable texts. Furthermore, the auto/biographies included here are all by male South African authors (from different class and racial positions), signalling the comparative dearth of life writing on the continent that centres disability. In spite of the gender limitation, however, the focus on issues of masculine [self-]identification permits an exploration of enlightening comparisons among the texts.

In focus within the chapter is the literary representation of these experiences as they are felt by key characters in the narratives, with the aim of providing insight into what it is like to live with a disability. Due to the aforementioned similarity in the gender of the protagonists, an important concern for this chapter is the texts’ depictions of the interface between disablement and notions of masculinity, within contexts governed by particular scripts of

hegemonic masculinities. At the core of the analysis is a conviction that bodily impairment affects the sense of self, impacting upon the portrayed characters primarily in the sphere of masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter is the first step in exploring the notion of ‘narrative enablement’, particularly in the way these texts create a connective thread with the reader through emotive descriptions of the characters’ experiences. Contributing to the study’s overarching interest in the ways in which literary representations of disability can present ‘enabling’ constructions of disability, this chapter is woven around the concept of the ‘experiential.’ I use the term ‘experiential’ as a way of emphasizing the primacy of the literary depiction of subjects’ experiences. When the narrative focuses on the thoughts or feelings of the person (or persons) with a disability in relation to their body, the reader/viewer is given insight that is not accessible when the disabled character remains on the periphery, which has tended to be the case in most literary works (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 9).

Considering these provisos, this chapter therefore traces how disabled male characters perceive their embodiment as they interact with a world that is saturated with prejudiced perceptions of their ‘different’ bodies. The analysis focuses on depictions of the disabled characters concerned – their thoughts, language use, as well as thoughts of others close to them regarding their disability. I examine the experiential with regard to the textually portrayed lives of various characters and authors in five texts: Musa Zulu’s *The Language of Me*, William Zulu’s *Spring Will Come*, Leslie Swartz’s *Able-Bodied* (as examples of life writing), and Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time* and Leila Aboulela’s *Lyrics Alley* (the latter two as examples of fictional works). These five texts are comparable in providing enlightening representations of disability and in highlighting disabled subjects’ conceptions of and responses to their own bodies. Featuring male characters that have varying degrees of physical disability, these narratives offer textual representations of what it means to inhabit ‘different’ male bodies. As textual articulations of the experiential, these life narratives and novels commonly exhibit what María Pía Lara calls the “illocutionary force,” bringing marginalized experiences into the public sphere. Perhaps this seems counter to the main thrust of disability studies, which draws attention away from the body and refocuses it on the

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<sup>5</sup> Masculinity is centred here because of the alarming scarcity of disability narratives by or about women within the African literary canon, as well as its recurrence as a theme across all the texts. As mentioned earlier (p.4), the existing literature features two hardly known texts, Esther Owuor’s *My Life as a Paraplegic* (2000) and Jane Kaberuka’s *Why Has God Forgotten Me?* These texts are fortunate exceptions to the rule, written as they are by women. Although they are valuable additions to the genre, they do not fit into the frame of this particular chapter, as was explained.

environment (see Siebers, 2008; Davidson, Siebers & Feal 2005). However, as Tobin Siebers writes in *Disability Theory*, “the reality of certain bodies is a fact, while harsh, that must be recognized” (5). Drawing on what he terms a “theory of complex embodiment”, Siebers further argues against neglecting the corporeality of disability. The social model of disability – upon which most of current disability studies is grounded – stresses the social and built environment, and argues that “disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice” (25). At its extreme, this model tends to side-line the specificity of disabilities. Siebers argues that we must acknowledge the mutually transformative relationship between the body and its representations (25). In other words, according to the theory of complex embodiment, “the economy between social relations and the body [is] not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but [...] reciprocal” (25). This approach retains the body at an important position, while not fitting it entirely into either the medical or the social model.

Siebers’s argument is useful in reading the embodied selves depicted in the texts analysed in the chapter, which explores the character’s relationship with the body, tracing the disability from its onset. Some of the characters, such as William Zulu in *Spring Will Come*, have their disabilities manifesting from a very young age. The manifestation of the disability has a profound effect on the way the affected individuals regard their bodies. Characters such as Musa Zulu (the author/narrator of *The Language of Me*) and Nur (one of the protagonists of *Lyrics Alley*) are disabled in adulthood. For these people, accepting the change in their bodies is a more difficult process. This sort of change normally involves “a natural depression that comes from the loss of mobility, limbs, sight, hearing, and other bodily functions” (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 166). In his memoir, Musa Zulu puts it simply: “becoming disabled in adulthood leaves you with a lot of questions” (43). This process of learning to ‘live with their disabilities,’ confronting these questions, is part of what this chapter explores. In its investigation into how the disabled body affects an individual’s sense of self, the chapter traces the experiential in each of the five texts, in an effort to unravel the way the intricacies of experiences of disability are presented in literary discourse.

My reading of the experiential in the texts is primarily informed by the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia, a term he uses to refer to the medley of various speech types within the prose narrative, which in turn reflect multiple belief systems directed towards the subject of the text. The literary work is itself one of many “heteroglot languages” (Bakhtin 272), and therefore expresses various ideological positions. Examining the texts as heteroglot expressions enables

an appreciation of the multivocality that informs the subjects' own voices. This multivocality emerges through the characters' expression of multiple, sometimes even contrasting, perspectives regarding the subject of disability. In other words, the narratives are spheres where heteroglossia is to be observed, in the belief systems and lived experiences captured and reflected in various utterances, both by authors/narrators and the characters they create. In the texts herein examined, this multiplicity of voices makes possible an examination of various perspectives on the disabled characters' experiences.

I also apply insights from scholars in autobiography studies and disability studies. G. Thomas Couser's work on specific types of life writing is very useful in this respect. In *Recovering Bodies* (1997), Couser observes that:

life writing about illness and disability [...] is significant not just because it represents a new category of life stories but also because it promises to foreground somatic experience in a new way by treating the body's form and function (apart from race and gender) as fundamental constituents of identity. (Couser, *Recovering* 12)

Although the entire citation holds relevance for this study, the most immediately significant part is the assertion that "the body's form and function [are] fundamental constituents of identity", a point that also applies to fictional works. Arguably, the disabled body has a different form, which limits its functionality in ableist environments. We must also bear in mind that in most societies today, the disabled body calls to mind a 'defective' body, or a corporeality characterized by limited functionality. The existence of this 'different' body problematizes normalized concepts of the body that abound in popular ableist belief; what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her seminal text *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) terms the "normate" (8). In the texts, therefore, it is not unusual to find the disabled characters presented alongside able-bodied others that the writers consciously or unconsciously figure as normates. If the body is the starting point for modelling the self, as John Paul Eakin (9) asserts, the disabled body does not figure in that articulation. In other words, the ideology of ability suggests that the disabled body cannot be used to assert a complete "I".

According to Siebers, the ideology of ability is "at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness [which] defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons" (*Disability Theory* 8). In this ideology, the prevailing understanding of disability associates achievements only with able-bodiedness. Consequently, disability is assumed to entail

helplessness. Reversing this belief is one of the goals of disability studies. Since the ideology of ability ascribes success and achievements to the able-bodied individual, it reinforces the undesirability of the disabled body. The result of this ideology is – as one example – medical attempts to restore the disabled body to able-bodiedness. Worse still is the supposition that physical disability always implies reduced cognitive function. A similar line of thought is proposed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in *The Body and Physical Difference* (1997), in which they claim that the majority of society is governed by the “ideology of the physical”. Similarly to Siebers’s notion, this ideology “constructs an imagined bridge between bodily differences and individual abilities, [seeking] to lure the reader/viewer into the mystery of whether discernible defects reveal the presence of an equally defective moral and civil character” (“Double Bind” 13). Here, the ideology of the physical figures the disabled body as imperfection on the physical, mental, and even moral levels.

Bakhtin argues that in the prose work, the “languages of heteroglossia” can “contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (292). The way the narratives (and indeed the characters within them) counter the ideology of ability is a manifestation of this meeting of “languages.” In this particular chapter, I examine the extent to which the narratives counter the ideology of ability, illustrating that in the process of individuation the disabled body indeed functions just like the hegemonically imagined ‘normate.’ In their challenge to ableist ideologies, these texts sometimes engage with dominant masculinity models in a manner that results in the adoption or embrace of such models. Contrary to the limitations forcibly placed on the disabled body by the ideology of ability, the characters in the texts under study display the reality that differences in bodily structure and functionality do not necessarily limit the assertions or creation of individuality.

### **Life, linocuts and love: *Spring Will Come***

William Zulu’s life story, *Spring Will Come*, actually takes its starting point from 1879, “the year that effectively marked the end of the great Zulu empire and its illustrious kingship” (1). The narrator’s strategy is to illustrate his Zulu ancestry, before embarking on his own story, which dwells on five main areas – ancestry, childhood, disablement, training and fame as a linocut artist, and his personal discovery of God. Some of these areas intersect with each other. It is in the narration of these experiences that we trace the experiential.

In the narrative, masculinity is mainly associated with a deeply entrenched belief in the sexual undesirability of the disabled body. For William Zulu, the idea of masculinity is

strongly tied to perceptions and performances of sexuality. His conservative Zulu community further emphasizes the link between masculinity and sexuality through its valorisation of men who have sired children (Hunter 99). In her introduction to intersectionality in the family, Patricia Hill Collins argues that various systems of oppression usually work “mutually” to “construct one another,” rather than existing independently (63). Her insight is evoked here to assist in understanding the intersection of masculinity and disability, as illustrated in *Spring Will Come*, where the narrator struggles to recognize the validity of his sense of masculinity as a man. Not surprisingly, Zulu’s conviction about the unattractiveness of his body takes root while he is admitted to hospital, recovering from an operation and undergoing physical therapy. As a space purposefully designed to house those who are either deemed infirm or afflicted with disease, the hospital ward creates a sense of ‘weakness’ and dependency which (when he is hospitalized) has a negative effect on Zulu’s male ego. His sense of diminished masculinity is further emphasised by a nickname he is given by one of the orderlies in hospital, who teasingly calls him “Bachelor-boy”. This name arouses mixed feelings in him:

Although I understood it as well meant by Malume, [my nickname] made me conscious of my missing relations with the opposite sex. I would quickly dismiss such thoughts by reminding myself that I was paralysed now and that any relationship was out of the question, yet I still enjoyed watching the young women who came to see the other patients during visiting hours. (70)

This passage reveals the narrator’s belief that his changed body renders him an unsuitable sexual partner (however, the second half of the cited passage is an example of multivocality exhibited in the narrator’s admitted contestation of his body’s “Bachelor-boy” status). William’s own long held assumptions regarding the propriety of romantic relationships and (it appears) of sexual encounter present an example of “how deeply some men with physical disabilities internalize hegemonic standards of desirability and sexuality which make them complicit in their own domination” (Gershick 199). Even after he leaves the hospital, he does not dare engage the opposite sex in any intimate relationship for fear of rejection. He exhibits confidence in all other interactions, except when it comes to establishing intimacy with women, despite his loneliness. To his embarrassment, his grandmother Gogo Ntshaliza takes every opportunity to get young girls interested in him, engaging some of William’s female friends in “jesting courtship” (186).

A constantly evoked effect of the disablement in William Zulu’s narrative is a sense of infantilization that emanates from the diminished independence brought about by loss of functionality. The “Bachelor-boy” tag is a reminder to the narrator that he might never

assume the ultimate status as a *man*, but is forever condemned to be a ‘boy.’ Subsequent events in the narrative overturn this assumption, but it is important to note the narrator’s initial assumption of having reverted to childhood as a result of the disability.

William’s thoughts also reveal a subscription to what R. W. Connell calls “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2001). The notion of hegemonic masculinity has been applied widely in gender studies to explain the behaviour of men in various geographical and cultural locations. In South Africa, for example, according to Kopano Ratele, “a heterosexual patriarchal capitalist masculinity is the hegemonic form of masculinity” (“Studying Men” 25). Notably, within all forms of hegemonic masculinity, the ideal masculine body is also the able-bodied one. Among other grounds, entrance into the fold of hegemonic masculinity is denied on the basis of physical disability (Gershick and Miller 456).

William’s experiences bring about a sense of isolation not only from society in general but also from the category of ‘desirable’ men. In the section cited above, the words “I was paralysed now and [...] any relationship was out of the question” confirm this conviction. This alienation is further expressed through one of the many instances when he muses on the existence of God. For a long time his belief in God is almost non-existent:

In his senseless way god had disabled my body and left in it a living heart that yearned, desperately, to love and be loved. If he could listen to my heart, surely he had heard it many times thumping excitedly and silently calling out to a lovely dame, while my eyes drank in her ripe African beauty, wishing I could propose. (208)

Even though the loneliness is there, for a long time William does not voice it. This passage is one instance of William’s recognition of his split self. He sees his body as an external part of him, which nevertheless houses a highly emotive being. As a permanent part of his being, therefore, he cannot do away with this body that – he is convinced – denies him emotional fulfilment. Interestingly, it is through the same God that he blamed for his disability that he finds hope for a partner. The more he accepts God, the more he considers that it is not impossible for him to find a life partner (222). He comes to believe that as long as the union is not based on sexual performance, it can succeed, and he prays for it.

William’s language reveals something else about the notion of the ideal body. As illustrated above, during and after his stay in hospital, William’s appreciation of women has not waned. Much as he tries to resist engaging with them, his desire for women and female company betrays a temporarily suppressed belief that he is just as deserving of love as anyone else (a

reality long realised by his grandmother Gogo Ntshaliza). This desire further indicates that behind the shy individual is a person who is as masculine as any other heterosexual man. If masculinity is tied to sexuality, then his appreciation of a woman's "ripe African beauty" is proof that his desire has not diminished. William is drawn to Phelisiwe primarily because of her physical beauty, by "her full, curvaceous figure [...] round, light-complexioned face with large, clear eyes and a full mouth that pouted tantalisingly, as if ready for a kiss" (292). This attraction indicates a turning point not only in the narrative, but also in the narrator's sense of self-worth, reflected in his admission that "as [he] gazed at her, [he] forgot [his] self-consciousness and [his] disability" (292). In this reversal is a clear illustration of the diminishing and re-establishing of a sense of selfhood. The self-depreciation that comes from regarding oneself as undesirable is tantamount to considering oneself incomplete. Moving from that state of mind and reasserting a belief in a sense of adequate selfhood is a feat that does not come easily. William Zulu comes to this realisation with some help from his religious faith.

So when Phelisiwe enters his life, William Zulu's mind (as he portrays it in the text) is receptive to the idea that he is a man who can be loved. Contrary to his earlier anxieties, Phelisiwe is not appalled by his disability. Instead, her regard for him is one of love and respect, which plays a great role in strengthening his sexual confidence. From the narrative, one gets the impression that the affection between the two – William and Phelisiwe – is enough to render his worries over his disability inconsequential. Thanks to this shared affection, he no longer regards his body as an impediment to the attainment of a love relationship. Remarkably, the author describes his wedding day as "the day I truly became a man" (306) – suggesting a transcendence of both the bachelorhood and boyhood of his aforementioned nickname while validating the idea that his disability does not deny him the fulfilment of his masculinity. This statement also reflects the community's valuation of a man when he finds a wife. In the re-discovery of his self-worth as a person is a simultaneous embrace of the dominant mode of masculinity and a challenge to the ideology of ability.

William's expression of his assumed physical undesirability and his desire for Phelisiwe are manifestations of polyvocality. In this instance, one realises, within a single narrator, an expression of differing belief systems regarding the same subject – the disabled body. Bakhtin argues that "the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness" (278). Also drawing on Bakhtin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe that even autobiographical narrators negotiate an

identity informed through a dialogic process. They “[come] to consciousness through multiple identities and multiple voices” (Smith and Watson 39). Religion is just one such route towards understanding the disabled body. In the second half of the narrative, the narrator describes the strengthening of his faith in tandem with a recovered optimism that colours most of the activities in his life. This optimism is what the title – *Spring Will Come* – signals. Worth noting in the narrative are moments where William’s own voice stands out amidst the plethora of belief systems that he encounters, which, in their own fashion, shape his own personal understanding of his anatomy as carrying a particular meaning. His realisation of his own worth, as expressed in the text, reveals an instance where the narrator’s own voice stands out among heteroglot voices around it.

In *Spring Will Come*, the narrator’s concerns with artistic development and disablement are (as indicated above) portrayed from time to time as interwoven. Art, primarily expressed through linocut prints, is important for the primary character in terms of career development, but also becomes a way in which the text transcends genre limits imposed by his use of the written word. In the first place, art in this text functions for the main character as an outlet for his creative energy. In addition, Zulu’s artworks provide (through the income that ensues) a counter to the limited mobility that occurs as a result of the disablement. To him, the disability is initially seen as a marker of loss of independence, and also affects his belief in his own masculinity. It is no wonder then that William strongly believes that “[t]he way out of [his] loneliness and isolation was to buy a car and drive away to Jo’burg” (283). The car would thus free him from the immobility of disability. Significantly, when he eventually obtains the vehicle, he feels “in control, driving my own car and somehow feeling master of my own destiny” (286). Acquiring the car is therefore one of the steps that make him realise that his disability does not translate into a cessation of living.

What one reads from William Zulu’s thoughts is an emerging realisation that his being is not defined by the use of his legs alone. Other activities that he engages in direct attention towards the unimpeded functionality of other parts of his anatomy, as in the driving of his vehicle, as well as his references to “the physical labour of printmaking” and to his ability to “[drive]” the tool “through the resisting material of the lino block” (135). Zulu thus expresses the value of his entire being – his mind as well as his body. Much as he directs a lot of energy towards poetry composition and his linocuts, he acknowledges other parts of his body that still function optimally. During a visit to Germany, for example, he meets some intellectually disabled children, after which he “felt lucky by comparison, almost privileged, for I at least

had half of my body functioning normally, with a brain that I could use to help others less fortunate than myself” (265). Some of these functioning parts are the ones that enable the artistic creativity, such as the eyes with which he sees both the beauty and misery around him, and the hands that he uses to render such scenes in his linocuts. This means, therefore, that he eventually accepts the indissoluble unity between his mind and his body. Together, they make up the complete person that is William Zulu. This sense of optimism with which *Spring Will Come* ends is a feature that also runs through Musa Zulu’s *The Language of Me*, particularly in the author’s reflection on his role as a disabled man in a dominantly ableist world.

### **A scrapbook of masculinity: *The Language of Me***

Musa Zulu’s *The Language of Me* is Musa Zulu’s deliberate effort not only to tell his story, but also to contribute to the creation of ‘corrective’ images of disability. The book is both a personal project and an act of disability activism. The first part – titled “Life After the Storm” – traces the events surrounding his disability across a seven year period. The second half of the book – “Scrapbook of My Soul” – consists of short prose pieces, drawings and poetry (there are also a number of poems inserted at chapter intervals in the first section of the book). These do not have any evident links with his disability.

In contrast to William Zulu’s *Spring Will Come*, a significant part of *The Language of Me* indicates the way disability affects Musa Zulu’s sense of himself as a man. Helpfully, the writer presents a few memories of his life before the disability. Exploring the experiential in this narrative, therefore, requires an approach where we draw on pre-disablement experiences and examine the way the narrator employs them to make sense of his disablement and its effect on his life. In this instance again we are able to observe a particular polyvocality that develops from the narrator’s pre-accident understanding of disability and the awareness of the disabled body that develops after the accident. For Musa Zulu, it is not just the paralysis that he suffers that affects his sense of masculinity. Instead, it extends to the opportunities that he believes are lost as a result of the paralysis. As a young man, he subscribes to the idea of a man as someone who is above all, successful in his career. This prospect of success appears to be shattered by the disability.

Reflecting on his past in the text, Musa Zulu observes: “I had always been a fast mover – in all senses of the term – delighting in speed, in a race, in outdoing the competition” (36). Mobility is presented in literal terms, referring to the movement of his legs, but also

metaphorically evoked to represent movement in his career. When he is paralysed, however, he feels that life as he knows it has come to an end:

Young as I was, I had already accomplished so much in my life and was looking forward to achieving so much more. I was at the peak of my potential, in the process of spreading my wings for still greater heights. My goal was to vault into the skies and shine up there with all the other stars. It was a crushing blow to realise that those big ambitions had died in the week along with the person I used to be... I used to cry a lot during those early days. (21)

One of the most striking aspects of Musa Zulu's language is indeed how personal it sometimes becomes (as the title indicates). His pains and losses are expressed in a metaphorically rich and impassioned voice that effectively communicates the experiential from his unique perspective. In the passage above, the emotion is captured primarily in the emphasis on youth and accomplishment, expressed in the language of upward mobility. As indicated earlier, one of the worst things about the ideology of ability is the conviction that disability entails failure in every other enterprise in life. In the cited example, Zulu's initial response to his disablement is an overwhelming frustration, sense of loss and grief, in the belief that his potential for personal success is now unattainable.

The hospital has already been identified as a site where individuality is diminished and one is figured as a weakened being, who has been admitted in an attempt to restore 'normalcy'. Like William Zulu, Musa Zulu realises the blow to his masculinity while in the hospital space. As a paralysed patient he requires assistance in several respects:

One of the most devastating things about paralysis is the way it impacts on normal bodily functions. Because I could no longer urinate in the normal way, I had to use a catheter to empty my bladder... I hated that bloody catheter. It became my worst enemy. I found it completely humiliating to have to fiddle with myself, poking about in my penis, trying to insert the tube into the right channel. It was like puncturing the very essence of your manhood, tampering with the core of you. (23)

One unique feature about the autobiographical mode is how it often uses the first person narrative form to draw the reader into intimate spaces, to share emotional experiences depicted by the author. As the passage above clearly indicates, in his conception of self, the disability injures "the very essence of [his] manhood [...] the core of [him]" (23). This indicates another aspect of the self that is directly related to the body. It is a gendered self that has been damaged here, the male self. The penis here is the bodily indicator of that self, and the fact that that part is being 'tampered' with is another indicator that his essence, the very

‘core’ of him, has been exposed and disabled. For the penis to lose some of its function represents a huge blow to a male human being. As “the core of [him]” the penis is not just another limb, but, to the narrator, the one limb that indicates his masculinity. As the anthropologist Robert F. Murphy so bluntly put it in *The Body Silent*, “being a man does not mean just having a penis – it means having a sexually useful one. Anything less than that is indeed a kind of castration” (96). Therefore, this is one last limb that should not suffer any limit to its functionality, lest it turn one into a type of eunuch. For the male author, the penis represents not only manhood, but also his (male) identity as a person. This is the case in most forms of hegemonic masculinity. As the narrative proceeds, however, one of the major changes in Zulu’s character is the realisation that his masculinity is not defined by sexual function alone. In this shift, he adopts a frame of masculinity that is not limiting, potentially tracing a path back to the dominant models of masculinity from which he felt excluded. Zulu’s narrative has some parallels with Thando Mqolozana’s novel, *A Man Who is not a Man* (2009), which features a character injured in a botched ritual circumcision. Like the protagonist in that novel, Musa Zulu chooses to believe that his masculinity cannot be narrowed down to the appearance or performance of a single part of his body. Both texts illustrate how the characters can successfully resist society’s attempts to define them as ‘incomplete’ men.

The passage on the affected penile function cited above reveals how Musa Zulu initially views his disability as damaging to his sense of selfhood by reflecting on his changed body. This is seen not only in both the loss of mobility and the exposure of and apparent diminished functionality in a vital bodily part of his male self. The catheter – an appendage – is connected to the penis as the “master-signifier” of masculinity (Connell 37), an indication not only of the damaged urinary function, but a blow to the man’s self-esteem. This is echoed on the various occasions in the narrative when the author mentions loss of erectile function.

Given the centrality of the penis to a man’s self-image, encounters with the opposite sex (assuming a heterosexual inclination, as is evident in Musa Zulu’s case), especially intimate ones, serve either to emphasize diminished masculinity or to reinforce the existing sense of one’s masculinity. In one study, Russell P. Shuttleworth observes that for disabled men, “confronting the dilemma of how to be masculine [...] is felt most acutely during their interpersonal attempts to establish sexual intimacy with others” (169-170). Such encounters create anxiety due to the expectation in the men of a particular kind and ‘level’ of sexual

performance. Musa Zulu narrates an unfortunate experience he had with his girlfriend<sup>6</sup> that highlights this phenomenon. As an indication of his having a diminished sense of self-worth, he convinces himself that it would not be fair to continue their relationship. He feels he will be a burden to her. However, part of the reason underlying this decision is his anxiety concerning his virility. He explains the reasons behind his decision:

It was difficult for her, because I was no longer the man I used to be; it was not just my ability to walk that was lost, but a lot of other things. Disability steals away your sexual performance, and with that, your sense of confidence and control. [...] I also remember the first night we spent together after I had left the hospital – she said she wanted to be with me. I could not get an erection and when I attempted masturbation to stimulate my penis, it only triggered my bladder and I wet the bed. My God – how it blew me apart! I could have killed myself right there and then. (31)

This passage hardly needs any elucidation, as the narrator's anguish is clearly and painfully communicated. Expressing the belief that he is "no longer the man [he] used to be" is perhaps the most straightforward illustration of Musa Zulu's sense of diminished masculinity and consequent humiliation. Furthermore, the passage carries a hint of nostalgia for a past when he had been a more 'complete man', who, in his mind at least, was indeed deserving of love and affection. This thought displays an ableist position resulting from living in a particular environment. Wanting to dismiss his partner is therefore a statement to the effect that he is not only less of a man, but also less of a person, since, it is implied, only a 'complete' person is worthy of love. With this passage, the narrator invites the reader into a scene of extreme intimacy and privacy, and then lays bare the humiliating, embarrassing and to him devastating outcome of that encounter. Such honesty has the effect of approximating the anguish that the writer feels, further revealing what it means for him to be disabled, and what this does to his sense of sexual masculinity – what one might term his sexual pride. Injury to the spinal cord usually affects a man's virility because it "commonly produce[s] some degree of impotence or sexual malfunction" (Murphy, *Body Silent* 95). This creates a sense of "symbolic castration" (Murphy, *Body Silent* 96) in men, due to the apparent loss of function in the male member. Entry into Musa Zulu's thoughts reveals a loss of control over that 'master-signifier' of his male being. The fact that he cannot control his penis, in the presence of a woman, seems to confirm the label of a 'non-man' that his disability threatens to confer upon him.

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<sup>6</sup> Her name is not mentioned in the text.

One of the many distortions and flawed beliefs pertaining to disability is the belief that disabled people are asexual beings. This is part of the ideology of ability identified by Tobin Siebers. Both disabled men and women are victims of this misconception. According to Susan Wendell, “disabled women suffer more than disabled men from the demand that people have ‘ideal’ bodies, because in patriarchal cultures people judge women more by their bodies than they do men” (113). While this might be true, a different, but equally polarizing, experience awaits disabled men. Lenore Manderson and Susan Peake argue that “[b]ecoming disabled for a man means to ‘cross the fence’ and take on the stigmatizing constructs of the masculine body made feminine and soft” (233). This is what Musa Zulu observes when he laments the fact that “so many disabled men find it so difficult to establish relationships with women – society alienates them from their manhood, since it defines them as being less of men” (109). Values of masculinity are conferred onto both male and female children by various socialising agents in their societies, including their parents, siblings and peers. The same society defines which bodies are to be valued. Physically disabled men’s sense of diminished masculinity therefore arises from the bodily valuation that is absorbed as one grows up.

Similarly to *Spring Will Come*, *The Language of Me* also highlights mobility as a central concern. It is a subject that appears across all the texts discussed in this chapter, and consistently reveals an adherence to hegemonic masculinity. Musa Zulu’s memoir is replete with mobility metaphors, showing how important a concern it is for Musa Zulu both before and after the accident. For instance, he speaks of wishing to “[spread his] wings,” soaring to the “heights” and “vault[ing] into the skies” (21) in a figurative reference to his career dreams. However, mobility in the literal sense is also powerfully presented in the text, beginning with the narrator’s description of his first car, a CTI Golf with which he had “a marriage made in boys’ heaven [...] tragically terminated after only nine months by the collision with the fateful brick wall” (24). The imagery employed here reveals the centrality of movement in dominant conceptions of masculinity (the man’s relationship with his car), as well as a subtle association of the state of immobility with infancy (the termination of the “marriage” after *nine* months). After this accident, his fear is that he “was doomed to a wheelchair’s pace of locomotion forever” (24). G. Thomas Couser observes that “the need to use a wheelchair literally lowers a person’s stature (and implicitly status), and the apparent uselessness of the lower body implies a lack of potency, sexual and otherwise” (*Recovering*

184). It is not just mobility that is under threat, but rather a bodily agency that is closely related to masculinity.

The passages cited from Musa Zulu's narrative are remarkable for their emotional appeal. The various instances where the writer reaches out to the audience in this fashion are another manifestation of the heteroglot languages of the text. The very title of the book – *The Language of Me* – at once highlights the intimate and private nature of the narrative and also points towards the centrality of language in the author's projection of his self. As the vehicle of the many 'voices' in the text, Zulu's language appeals affectively to the reader in an attempt to bring us as close to the experiential encounter as is textually possible. He shares the mental agony he feels at the realisation of his bodily changes, as well as the joy he experiences at changes in fortune later in his life. As an example of narrative enablement, the effect of such language is not only to make the narrative interesting, but to create empathy in the reader. Although the narrative cannot fully replicate the actual experience, it achieves the goal of making the reader sensitive to some of the encounters undergone by someone in Musa Zulu's position.

However, there is another possible, more negative, effect of such a mode of writing. Mitchell and Snyder observe that such a confessional mode "places physical and cognitive limitation and difference on display to be consumed, and the mainstream parading of personal misfortune inevitably assures the reader/viewer of his or her comparative good fortune or assuages a shared societal sense of guilt and insensitivity" ("Double Bind" 10). In other words, representing disability through written narrative can have the effect of distancing the 'consumer'. So any pathos created by the narration is accompanied by a feeling of relative safety on the part of the (mostly normatively bodied) readers, a process which recalls Ato Quayson's argument that the representation of disability in literature is accompanied by a "short-circuiting" of dominant protocols of representation (*Nervousness* 15). In elaborating upon his useful concept of "aesthetic nervousness," Quayson writes:

in works where disability plays a prominent role, the reader's perspective is also affected by the short-circuiting of the dominant protocols governing the text – a short-circuit triggered by the representation of disability. For the reader, aesthetic nervousness overlaps social attitudes to disability that themselves often remain unexamined in their prejudices and biases. (*Nervousness* 15)

It is quite notable, however, that the one literary mode where such nervousness does not occur is life writing. This is because in such narratives "the representation is conducted

consistently from the point of view of the persons with disabilities and their caregivers, [in which case] the opportunities for a ‘collapse’ of the dominant protocols are curtailed” (Quayson, *Nervousness* 51). However, as Charles A. Riley argues, “[t]o capture the attention of an agent or editor, thousands of readers, and a movie studio, writers naturally pander to expectations of pathos and ‘courage in the face of adversity’” (26). The affective appeal of the narrative therefore does not immediately translate into automatic attitudinal change on the part of the readers. The text can thus be seen as mediating encounters between the disabled and the nondisabled, encounters which tend to be fraught with nervousness and anxiety.

Like William Zulu in *Spring Will Come*, Musa Zulu does not declare war on hegemonic masculinity. Indeed he is determined to still prove that he is a man to the world. However, his text exists as a powerful counter to ableism. In the emotional narration of his “journey”, and his adherence to some of the key tenets of hegemonic masculinity, Zulu’s text stands as a testament to narrative enablement, creating a path through which his readers can enter his world.

### **Expanding the blueprint of masculinity: *Lyrics Alley***

In *Lyrics Alley*, Leila Aboulela crafts a story of an affluent Muslim family, the Abuzeids, living in Sudan. The story revolves around several characters within or connected to this family. Of particular interest is Nur, a young man who fractures his spine in a diving accident, resulting in his subsequent quadriplegia. The text affords the reader a look at Nur’s own feelings towards his existence as a disabled man, and also depicts the way his immediate relations and friends react to his disability.

Aboulela’s novel is a more explicit example of the Bakhtinian heteroglot text in the sense of the author employing multiple characters to tell the story. As one way of organizing heteroglossia, “[t]he language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character’s speech possesses its own belief system...” (Bakhtin 315). The chapters are presented with one of five characters – Nur, Soraya, Nabilah, Ustaz Badr, or Mahmoud Bey – as the focaliser. The reader is given access to that particular character’s thoughts and feelings. Nur’s language develops from being a language expressing pain, frustration and anger to a voice conveying a more positive outlook towards life. Most importantly, it is voiced in both prose and poetry. Soraya’s language is one of ambition, and love for her betrothed. Nabilah’s voice highlights the cultural differences between the country of her husband (Sudan) and her own (Egypt) – differences which eventually bring a strain to

her marriage. Ustaz Badr's chapters are ruminations that mostly revolve around his religious faith and his need to provide for his family, while Mahmoud Bey's thoughts predominantly focus on how to improve his already impressive business prospects. Within all these voices, the reader discovers other languages expressing multiple belief systems within the environment, from which the author's position is drawn.

Perhaps more overtly than the other texts, *Lyrics Alley* reveals how the male character's sense of masculinity is heavily dependent on socially prescribed notions of what it means to be a man. In evoking her male characters, Aboulela constantly draws attention to the way they are regarded not just as men, but rather as men seen through a particular Muslim frame. Indeed references to religion are a constant feature in the Abuzeid household, mostly in the way Aboulela admirably draws attention to some of the tensions revolving around religious orthodoxy and more liberal lifestyles within the home. The respect accorded to the men in this society is therefore related to how well they fulfil the roles expected of them. For example, Nur's father Mahmoud Bey has his masculinity prominently featured at various points due to two key qualities – his success as a businessman and his management of a polygamous household. He is one of the richest men in Sudan, and is therefore respected by many. Notably, he has been able to marry twice, and is able to support both households, that of his first wife Hajjah Waheeba and that of his younger, 'classier' Egyptian wife, Nabilah. That he has sired children with both women also adds to his prestige.

Mahmoud Bey therefore sets the standard of masculinity in the Abuzeid family. His eldest son, Nassir, proves quite early in life that he cannot live up to that standard, having been branded as lazy, as being an alcoholic and (as supposed provider) unable to profitably run a branch of the family business. Therefore, the paterfamilias Mahmoud sets his hopes on Nur, who shows much promise at school. Particularly pleasing to Mahmoud is the realization that Nur is faithfully following the blueprint of masculinity that is bound to produce the heir to the Abuzeid business enterprise. He attends school at a prestigious institution, the Victoria College in Alexandria, where he is not only a brilliant student in class, but is also the captain of the school's football team. Perhaps above all, Nur "holds his father's sense of duty inside him" (42). As the proverbial chip off the old block, Nur is everything his father intended him to be, reflecting some of the traits that are in his father. Mahmoud Bey is therefore convinced that "Nur would become the next chairman of the Abuzeid group of companies, the head of the next family" (42); a position occupied by the most respected man in the family.

Body image is a central concern in this novel, especially if we focus on the character of Nur. Nur's character is so athletic in the first couple of pages of the novel that it is tempting to think that the writer deliberately sets the stage for the shock that follows his disablement. Apart from being the captain of the football team, he is also an able swimmer. In the planning of a future for the family, Nur has already chosen a future wife (a choice endorsed and validated by his father) and this is none other than his cousin Soraya, the other major character in the novel. In this light, therefore, he is a character for whom everything appears to be going well, a plot scheme which almost predicts a reversal of fortune.

On the actual day when Nur is disabled, his actions portray him as a romantic and energetic man, making Soraya fall even more deeply in love with him. His romantic words and gestures prior to the accident reinforce the image of Nur as a 'complete' man in Soraya's eyes. To her, he is that rare mixture of sensitivity (reflected in his love of poetry) balanced with a masculinity reflected in his words, gestures and agility displayed in swimming and playing football. His future is indeed clearly charted for him. Also important is the fact that Soraya is undoubtedly a part of that future. After all, as she thinks to herself at one point, "[Who] else *could* she marry?" (70, italics in original). The natural order of events is that she should marry Nur, just like her sister Fatma married Nur's brother Nassir. Nur accompanies Soraya to watch a movie, and afterwards, "Nur held her hand and they walked arm in arm like other couples did, unthinkable in Sudan or in the presence of anyone they knew" (72). They visit the beach, and there "[t]hey walked along the edge of the water because Soraya had seen other couples do that and she wanted to imitate them" (73). They talk enthusiastically about swimming and dancing, foreshadowing the fact that Nur will soon be deprived of the ability to engage in such activities. He also displays feats of athleticism that are impressive to all around him:

The football rolled towards them. Nur was quick to stand up, place his foot on it and dribble away from the umbrella in the direction of the game. With one kick, he joined the game. He did not have to announce that he was captain of the school team; his footwork was enough for the soldiers to welcome him. (80)

Watching such activity makes Soraya proud, especially since Nur's brother Nassir is nowhere near as physically fit. For Soraya, "watching Nur run was a pleasure" (80). On this particular occasion, Aboulela deliberately presents Nur as the most active character on the scene, contrasted with his disabled, motionless state soon afterwards. Nur is the only one in their group who goes for a swim, plays football, and eventually goes for the fateful dive that

injures his spine. This association with the soldiers indicates Nur's symbolic entry into this most admired of masculine vocations, entry which he gains easily due to his athleticism. In contrast, Nassir prefers to slump in the beach chair, not willing to move a muscle. Instead, he displays a masculinity defined through overindulgence and financial generosity; he is the man who will provide money to all who need it. At this moment, as he interacts easily with the soldiers, Nur's masculinity is not to be questioned, either by himself or the onlookers. These masculine displays of ability impress and are carefully noted by Soraya. As she enjoys watching him play football on the beach, she realises that this activity is "a masculine dedication she could not share" (80). The fairy-tale setting, where everything seems magical to Soraya, serves to indicate the extent to which masculine athleticism is idealised as a 'princely' ideal in heteronormative societies, predicting the devastating consequences for Nur of the loss of physical mobility.

This emphasis on Nur's pre-disablement physicality is deliberate, since Aboulela's characterisation of him after the accident marks a stark contrast with the athletic, active Nur. The magic of the moment transforms into horror when Nur is injured as a consequence of diving into the water. Again the reader is given perspective on the moment through Soraya's eyes, and one of her first impressions is that of shame at seeing him so helpless (82). Aboulela employs Soraya's perspective at this point to give the reader a glimpse into the way this particular culture regards men. In her society, a man must never be in a helpless situation, especially before the eyes of so many others. She feels similarly about her uncle Mahmoud Bey as she watches him lying ill in bed at the start of the narrative. She "wanted him as before, not weak or bedridden; she wanted him to be on his feet again, smiling and striding" (1). To see Nur so helpless therefore goes against the norms of masculinity that their society inculcates. A man must stand upright, must act, and not lie helpless with his head "lolling to one side" (82). This conviction of Soraya's carries more weight in this particular moment because it is her betrothed who is found in this emasculating position (as the hegemonic perspective defines it).

Soraya's voice in the text is particularly significant, not merely in relation to Nur's disability and the implications for his masculinity. She is not just another voice in the plethora of voices that is the novel, but stands out as a unique female who might challenge the oppressive masculinity that characterises many of the spaces in the novel. This is evidenced by her love for school and her realization of passivity in her sister Fatma. Aboulela's characterisation of Soraya (and to some extent, Nabilah) affords the reader a window into the rigid patriarchy of

this particular society. The agency of women in the text seems limited to the private space of the homestead, whereas the men have free rein outside the home.

It is primarily through Nur's own thoughts, however, that the experiential is most poignantly conveyed. Several changes to his life subsequent to the diving accident affect Nur's sense of his own masculinity as diminished. This feeling develops primarily because he can no longer assume the path that his father had set for him. Mahmoud Bey's reputation for masculinity is constructed largely around his economic prowess, hence Nur experiences a sense of diminished masculinity because – as a result of reduced bodily functionality – he will never achieve the same financial success. He cannot hope to assume chairmanship of Abuzeid Trading. He can no longer be the same student of whom Mahmoud Bey had been so proud. And once Mahmoud Bey cancels Nur's engagement to Soraya, it cements the fact that he is not the one to continue the Abuzeid genetic line. These feelings are precisely what make up the ideology of ability. According to Tobin Siebers, one key tenet of this ideology is that “the disabled body is limited in what it can do and what it can be trained to do” (*Disability Theory* 10), a point which captures the ascription of reduced humanity to the disabled body. It is interesting to note the overlaps between the ideology of ability and hegemonic masculinity, in the sense that both ideologies venerate the able-bodied anatomy.

The other development that wounds his male pride is the feeling of helplessness that develops from the quadriplegia. As a result of the loss of control over his arms and legs, Nur discovers that he can no longer fend for himself. He has to depend on others for dressing, cleaning and feeding him, experiences that bring about a profound sense of infantilization similar to that felt by William Zulu. At one point, as his mother feeds him, Nur muses about how “[i]t was like he was a baby again” (106). The infantilizing image is painfully completed by his mother's loving encouragement to him: “Open your mouth. Take another sip of milk” (106). In hospital, this sensation is continued amidst the nurses responsible for changing Nur's diapers and bathing him, something that terribly embarrasses both Nur and Mahmoud Bey (106). When he goes to London for an operation, the same thing happens:

It shames him that English ladies are changing and washing him, sticking the enema in the morning, shaving his chin. They should not be doing such menial work, and it makes his face hot and his eyes red with anger. Dressed and clean, he would like to chat to them, be nice to them, but they are busy. (117)

In these lines, one hears Nur's own thoughts momentarily eclipsing the author's description of the hospital. The embarrassment that is communicated in the passage is Nur's own voice,

and the flushing of his face and reddening of his eyes are the non-verbal voicing of that shame; shame which comes from the realisation that he cannot interact with the nurses as a non-patient male. To them he is the invalid who requires washing. Apart from this aid, which is emasculating enough, what hurts his pride even more is that in the ward, he is surrounded by people who have been injured in war, in the course of performing one of the ultimate feats of masculinity, fighting in battle. His accident on the beach therefore appears trivial in comparison.

It is in emotional moments like these that the experiential is powerfully expressed. In *Lyrics Alley*, it is not just the content but also the writer's style which permits the appreciation of such experiences. All the chapters where Aboulela presents Nur as the focaliser are rendered in the simple present tense. The effect of this deliberate choice of style is to make the reader understand how time appears to slow down for Nur. Aboulela effectively mimics – in the textual mode – Nur's immobility, almost as though every second of his existence is captured in words. Aboulela deliberately makes Nur's voice distinctive in order to convey the immediacy of his predicament and this feature of her text is apt to make the reader emotionally responsive. Nur's suffering appears protracted in such moments. In the sections where his thoughts are presented, the reader gets the impression that life goes on for everyone else except him.

As referred to above, the ultimate blow to his sense of masculinity is when his father, Mahmoud Bey, cancels his engagement to Soraya on the grounds that “[he] will not shackle [Soraya] to an invalid” (159). At this point in the narrative, the reader realises that the father's actions and provision of care for the son are not necessarily out of love, but rather spurred by a sense of patriarchal duty and a need to maintain the appearance of the caring father. Once Nur becomes disabled, his importance in his father's eyes appears to wane, especially since he will no longer take over the family business. Mahmoud's actions reveal his insensitivity to Nur's sense of human dignity and worth. Cancelling the engagement confirms the ‘invalidity’ of Nur's masculinity – his fitness to be a husband – in his father's eyes. In spite of the fact that Soraya still has feelings for him, she has no say in the matter, this being an issue where decisions are made by the patriarchs in the family. Nur's reaction to this is a hunger strike, during which he hardly says anything to anyone and scarcely accepts any food. But it is in vain. Soraya is lost to him, like so many other things in his life.

At the end of the day, he realises that he is denied many things as a result of the disability:

Soraya will marry someone else. In a year or two she will be a bride and there is nothing he can do about it. He will not take his place at the Abuzeid office; he is finished in that respect. He will not go to Cambridge University, even though he excelled in his exams. He will not play football again, he will not drive a car. He will not, he will not, he will not. (164)

The repeated negations here emphasise that to Nur, disablement takes away numerous opportunities he felt destined for. Disability brings a stop to most plans in his life, eventually bringing the realization that he can no longer pursue life according to the blueprint for a man in the Abuzeid household.

The space to which Nur is restricted after the accident also has an effect on his sense of masculinity. Because of his limited mobility and the need for assistance in essential functions, he has to stay at home with the womenfolk: “The men go to work in the mornings, and again after their lunch and midday siesta, while he is stuck at home with the babble of women” (160). The traditional set up of the Abuzeid family (and indeed of most families in the Muslim community in Sudan) entails that males have a particular space that they must occupy, and females have theirs. In most cases, the females keep to themselves, restricted to their private space in the *hoash*.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the few times that the females leave their private space to join the company of men is when the men are ill or injured, as seen in the situations of Nur and Mahmoud Bey. Such descriptions unfortunately reinforce the assumption of illness or disability as feminising conditions. After his accident, Nur almost always finds himself in the company of his mother, Hajjah Waheeba. At first, Nur takes interest in the activities of the women, but is soon convinced that the homestead is not a masculine space, and longs for moments when he can escape the household. For him, all the “hours spent grooming and hours spent cooking” (161) are a waste of time. That he refers to the women’s chatting as “babble” reflects his sense of alienation in this particular space, as well as his subscription to a form of hegemonic masculinity that disparages women’s labour and discourse. Interestingly, his later embrace of poetry (regarded in his home as an effeminate activity) signals a softening in his position regarding such entrenched masculinity standards.

Nur’s poetic endeavours are an indication of change in his character towards the end of the novel. Poetry becomes an “outlet” for channelling his innermost “grievances” (260-261),

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<sup>7</sup> In his review of *Lyrics Alley*, Robin Yassin-Kassab refers to a hoash as “a traditional living space half open to the air”. Yassin-Kassab, Robin. “Robin Yassin-Kassab reviews Leila Aboulela’s *Lyrics Alley*.” *Wasafiri*. Retrieved from [http://www.wasafiri.org/pages/news\\_01/news\\_item.asp?News\\_01ID=226](http://www.wasafiri.org/pages/news_01/news_item.asp?News_01ID=226)

which mainly concern his disability and the loss of Soraya as a future wife. In verse, he discovers a way of articulating what social convention does not permit him to. Nur's poetic creativity has other significant purposes. It affords him a reason for living, and reintroduces the otherwise isolated Nur to the world. Because of his skill, various other poets come and visit him and they discuss poetry in the *hoash*. Eventually Hamza Al-Naggar, a popular musician, sings Nur's lyrics on the radio, ensuring Nur's instant fame. Aboulela thus portrays art as enabling for Nur, especially since Mahmoud Bey is initially scornful of Nur's interest in poetry. In the presence of his fellow poets, Nur appears "serious and happy, totally engaged" (255). As the novel closes, there are hints of Nur planning to publish a poetry collection.

The complexity of Aboulela's depiction of Nur's disability leaves the reader with some measure of unrest, particularly due to the realization that a particular form of hegemonic masculinity (that hardly recognises the value of artistic creativity) is firmly entrenched in Nur's society. For the most part, however, her portrayal of Nur does not deny him his humanity. Nur is fashioned as a character who cannot be reduced to his disability. Her characterisation of Nur has merit primarily in the way she resists using him merely as a symbol for the social environment. The material reality of Nur's disablement is never ignored, as painful as it may be to describe. It is in these descriptions, expertly rendered from the perspectives of various characters, that the first emergence of narrative enablement occurs. The intensity of Nur's feeling of loss has the potential to affect the reader, allowing for a more engaged exploration of the other avenues that the novel affords in its enabling portrait of this character in his particular society.

### **Fathers and sons: Performing Masculinity in *Able-Bodied***

In most societies, male children are socialised into masculine gender roles, where they learn to engage in certain behavioural 'norms' in order to exhibit to the world their integration into their gender roles. Their peers and parents are constantly vigilant to ensure that the children are "doing gender" in the acceptable fashion (Gershick 192). This echoes Judith Butler, who argues that gender is constructed through "doing" or "performance" by various subjects (24). So it is that "normally developing little boys," for example, "must be active and willing to push one another around; maleness and aggression go together" (Fausto-Sterling 132). Perhaps the person who finds himself under especial pressure during this process of socialisation of boys is the father, who has to ensure not only that his son is 'masculine

enough,' but that he himself is able to instil masculine qualities in the young one. As such, most fathers will normally engage in sports and other 'masculine' activities with their sons, in part as an effort to teach the male offspring masculine qualities.

*Able-Bodied* is to a large extent about such a father-son relationship. This is a story about Alfred Swartz, narrated by his son, the author Leslie Swartz. However, the narrator has a lot to say about several other interests not concerning his father, not the least of which is his own childhood and career. Indeed, at times the text reads like an autobiography. Nevertheless, the focus is for the most part on Alfred Swartz. The subtitle, "scenes from a curious life," hints at the centrality of Alfred Swartz's disability and the role it played in both his and Leslie's lives.

This text differs from the previous two [auto]biographical texts in several respects, one of which is the narrative position. Indeed, with this book, we are given a perspective on disability from what Paul John Eakin calls a "proximate other", who in this case is the son. These kinds of narrators, engaging in relational autobiography, narrate stories "in which the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance or more important than the life of the reporting self" (Eakin 85). As a heteroglot text, the narrative does not only feature the lives of other family members, but also includes their voices in the text. Remarkably, the narrator admits to the possibility of "the silenced stories of my mother and my sister and who knows who else in the family threatening to pop up and make themselves heard" (15) in the course of his narrative. As I illustrate presently, such voices do emerge from time to time. However, in this quote one sees another intriguing feature of Swartz's language – a unique humorous tone that rises to the surface from time to time, lending a conversational style to the writing. This style primarily asserts the intimacy of the relationship between the narrator and his subject, and also serves as the writer's way of handling some difficult memories.

Leslie Swartz occupies a world that is quite different from that of the previous characters. He is a white, able-bodied university professor. This recalls Couser's observation that the writers of auto/somatography are often already familiar with the writing exercise (*Recovering* 4), something that clearly applies to Leslie Swartz. The key disabled character is Leslie's father, Alfred, who has club feet. Swartz describes his father as having "twisted hammer toes," "strange flat feet," a "funny hip," a "blue mark below the skin on [his] side," and a "pronounced and painful limp" (1). The memoir is an attempt by Swartz to explore what it must have been like for his father to inhabit such a body, while at the same time examining

the way he, the narrator, feels about that paternal body. As such, we examine the experiential from a unique perspective, reading the disabled character's experiences through the perspective of his able-bodied son.

The language that the narrator employs in describing his father's disability (as cited above) is noteworthy. The description stands out precisely because of what is absent from it. It is expressed in the voice of childish curiosity. The narrator tries to recapture the way he thought of his father's anatomy as a child. Only at that age would he consider his father's feet "strange" and the hip "funny". Such language captures his familial closeness to the disabled character. As one reviewer notes, "the very familiarity of the language and the scrupulously honest voice enhances" the uniqueness of the text (Asmal 412). Medical terms have the effect of distancing the human factor. But to use words like "strange" and "funny" powerfully brings forward the element of human curiosity into the narrative.

Masculinity in this text has to do with the position (and authority) of the father in the family. In the ironically titled *Able-Bodied*, we encounter Alfred Swartz – by no means an overbearing patriarchal figure, but an individual who is nevertheless determined not to let his disabled body diminish his position as the father figure in his family. Like the characters in the texts already discussed, Alfred Swartz is anxious about the extent to which his disability limits his sense of himself as a masculine figure. The difference between *Able-Bodied* and the previous narratives is the tenacity with which the character resists the association of his disability with weakness, in the process displaying an adherence to the dominant model of masculinity in his society.

Swartz presents his father as someone who chooses not to be very self-conscious about his own disability. The father is not averse to displaying his club feet in public, as several pictures in the book reveal. In fact, the narrator sees himself as being more aware of his father's disability than the man himself. The young Swartz is able to recognize moments of discomfort and anxiety among people who encounter his father for the first time. He notices, for example "the flicker of confusion, of pity and at times of revulsion on the faces of people who met [his] father for the first time and saw his awkward limp, or his bare feet with twisted toes when he was on the beach" (43). But the father himself seems to be largely unaware of the stares he attracts. As one reads the memoir, the father's body and what that body signifies to those around him are revealed from the perspective of those others (heteroglot voices channelled through the narrator's voiced observations). From these observations, we get a

sense of the value accorded to the older Swartz's different body by people around him. Public stares have no effect on him. The appearance of his body, therefore, is not a hindrance of any sort to his male authority. We can conclude from this then that Alfred's body image is stable enough for him to assert his masculinity with his family around. However, this stability is not absolute.

Alfred Swartz's disability is congenital, so he has lived with it from birth. Within his family, the father's body is not considered odd, partially due to the fact that in this close-knit group, disability is never really a strange thing, save for one case that the narrator mentions in passing. He writes of his father's sister who died as a child due to severe disabilities:

I know almost nothing about this phantom aunt, but she lives on in our family iconography as the 'monster' – physically very badly impaired, much more impaired than my father himself – who suffered and wrought suffering through a terrible, brutal infancy and then died very young. (3)

This is perhaps the most extreme case in a number of disabilities that Swartz mentions in his family tree. In spite of the fact that the narrator here attempts to present the picture of a caring family, the image that one gets of this "phantom aunt" is rather unsettling in the sense that the reader goes away with the impression that the family was relieved at her passing. Referring to this person as the "monster" within the family may have been done in a spirit of conviviality, but it strongly suggests the other members' aversion to her, not only due to her suggested different looks but also due to the suffering she is said to have caused. The narrator never delineates the exact kind of suffering this is. The term "monster" therefore carries connotations not only of difference, but also of unsightliness. Furthermore, she is referred to as a "phantom aunt," conveying not only the idea of a figure in the recesses of family history, but also linking her to ghostly eeriness and horror. This is further reflected in the fact that "she *lives on* in family iconography" (my emphasis). Throughout the text, Leslie speaks with affection of most of his relations, disabled or not. However, in the mention of this distant aunt, what was probably initially meant to sound as pity comes through as horror. As brief the mention of this aunt is, the impact of her short existence is palpable. Although this is just a passing mention in *Able-Bodied*, it serves to present the idea that the family was anything but perfect, either bodily or emotionally.

In his highly influential essay "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin argues that the prose writer encounters an "object [that is] a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound" (278). These include various opinions about the subject, which the writer

includes in his text. As a narrative exhibiting such polyvocality, *Able-Bodied* portrays Swartz's interpretation of his father's disability as informed primarily by the perceptions of family members, and secondarily by strangers that he observes meeting his father. Bakhtin further argues that any "living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance" (277). Bakhtin's emphasis on "heteroglot social opinion" (277) highlights the phenomenon that an object of utterance, such as disability, is informed by multiple voices. In *Able-Bodied*, this social context is partially represented by the family, which plays a large role in defining selfhood for Swartz, as well as for his father. The family serves as "the key environment in the individual's [self] formation" (Eakin 85). In *Able-Bodied*, the narrator explains how strongly family figures in the life of the disabled character. He observes that his "father grew up being told in no uncertain terms that he was a worry and a burden" (65). The narrator's grandmother is constantly complaining and berating the father "repeatedly and publicly for how he had made her suffer, from his miserable infancy" (2). This is in reference to the poor health the boy had suffered as well as his having had to be taken all the way to England for an operation.<sup>8</sup> She is also bitter "at not having produced a 'normal' child" (3). The mother's influence is so strong that it is the main reason why Alfred Swartz never wanted to be a burden to anyone:

My father's pain and physical difficulties had never been his own; they were never allowed to be. Any pain he might have had was translated immediately into an added burden for his poor mother. In his life, especially growing up, any weakness he felt, any pain, any need for help and care, quickly became a way in which his mother could show him how hard her life was, what a burden he was, how much she had gone through. (60)

One would expect such complaints from a close family member to have ingrained in the young Alfred a sense of deficiency. A reduced sense of his own human worth would normally result for a child from such comments by his parent. Having been constantly told that he was a burden as a child, the adult Alfred Swartz strove "to prove in various ways that he wasn't" (65), probably also out of a desire not to be associated with the 'monstrous' aunt in the annals of family history. Assertions of independence reflect that exact determination. It appears, however, that the mother is the only one who makes these complaints. The rest of

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<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to explore the older Swartz's experiences with the medical fraternity. The narrative hints at several instances when the father went for operations on his foot. One wonders whether such operations were in order to assuage the pain or to 'cure' the disability. However, details of those hospital visits are not included in the text.

the Swartz family is portrayed as a valuable and reliable support structure. Families represent spaces of sociality around which life writing narratives may be organised. These spaces consist of:

relationships and actions that are formalized in communicative interaction and ritualized or identified by gesture and bodily positioning [...]. In life writing [...], negotiations occur across boundaries – differences of rank, nation, ethnicity, religion, and gender. (Smith and Watson 44)

Existing in these social spaces means the narrator's story intersects with the stories of other individuals in precisely the manner Bakhtin observes. The narrative may be "implicated in and [impinge] on the lives of others and may encapsulate their biographies" (Smith and Watson 44). This point is exemplified in Swartz's inclusion of snippets of the lives of not only his father, but of other individuals in his family and at his workplace.

The memoir repeatedly draws attention to Alfred Swartz's paternal expressions of masculinity, behavioural eccentricities that the narrator recognises for their relation to his father's anatomical peculiarity. The way Alfred Swartz treats his children affords a look not only into a father's display of affection towards his son and daughter, but also a glimpse into a disabled man's assertion of his position as the male authority figure, who is tasked with engaging the children in aggressive acts of socialisation such as sports. The older Swartz is portrayed as a person driven by sportsmanship, and is in this respect contrasted with the narrator himself, who – as a teenager – is not interested in sports at all. According to Swartz, his father "loved golf with an irrational passion which [...] is not that uncommon among golfers" (8). This is especially significant in explaining what function sports plays in the disabled man's assertion of himself. In the first place, the golf course represents a sanctuary from "the world of difficult women" (9) who dominate the home. This echoes the predicament that Nur in *Lyrics Alley* finds himself in, unable to escape the space of women, a space which threatens to define him as equally feminine. In contrast, thanks to his mobility, Alfred Swartz is able to escape these "fearsome matriarchs" (Asmal 412) and find himself at the golf course, which is different from the homestead in its association with activity, and not the passivity and noise of the home. Secondly – and perhaps as an extension of the latter point – it is at the golf course where he gets the opportunity to assert his masculinity through agency, while at the same time resisting any associations of his disability with weakness or helplessness:

He would return from the golf course exhausted and often very sore, having limped around however many holes there were [...] and having had a drink or two in the pub after the game, satisfied and happy in spite of the pain. I gather he was a good sportsman, a person who overcame his impairments. (8)

Leslie Swartz's description of his father at the golf course provides evidence of the older Swartz's efforts to disassociate himself from femininity. His limp and his pain do not stop him from excelling at the game. The "drink or two in the pub" is another key point that illustrates the man's masculinity – his engaging in manly camaraderie with other golf players over a few drinks, probably over discussions of male oriented subjects like the sport itself.

Almost every piece of life writing is valued for the fact that it is a record of human agency in some form (Smith and Watson 54). In *The Language of Me* and *Spring Will Come*, this agency is asserted in various ways, including the acquisition of vehicles. In *Able-Bodied*, the agency manifests through sporting activities. The importance of sports in the lives of men throughout the globe is an undeniable fact, to the extent of the sociologist Erving Goffman claiming the activity as "the only expression of male human nature – an arrangement specifically designed to allow males to manifest the qualities claimed as basic to them: strengths of various kinds, stamina, endurance, and the like" ("Sexes" 322). Sport is one of the main ways in which disabled men assert their (masculine) selves. It "allows disabled men to experience their bodies as bodies of agency, movement, and control" (Manderson and Peake 234-235). The world of sport in this case offers Alfred Swartz shelter from the overbearing women at home, where his agency is threatened. Therefore, an opportunity to assert – and display – agency is good for the self. The older Swartz discovers that in golf. This agency, displayed through successful sporting activity, ensures his belonging to the male fold, and consequently renders immaterial the mark of difference on his body. It enables him to exist like any other male person, since "[he] would not countenance special treatment, [and] he did not want to be different" (9). The father's behaviour could be explained by referring to Gershick and Miller's "Three R Framework", according to which, active engagement in sport by disabled men is usually a display of internalization of an ideal of predominant masculinity (461). It falls within the hegemonic masculinity ideal of athleticism. Swartz's father invests a lot of his time in sport in spite of the pain in his hip, because it permits him to be part of a particular category of masculinity. Through sports, he staves off the threat to his sense of masculinity that his 'different' bodily appearance represents.

Although the golfing route is one way in which he asserts his male selfhood, the other perhaps more significant avenue that the father takes is through his children, particularly the narrator. The father attempts to nurture the love of sport in his children, which can be read as a way of exercising agency through these children. For instance, the narrator notes, “my father wanted me to have the joy of sport, but in some sense he also wanted me to play sport on his behalf” (101). Much as the father loves sports and pushes himself to the limit, there remain some obstacles that his body cannot pass. Unfortunately for the father, Leslie resists engaging in sporting activities:

I hated running and was bad at it; I was awkward and slow. I was always one of the last in races and I dreaded athletics events [...] In fact, I was useless at all sports and very poorly coordinated [...] I learnt every trick in the book to get out of compulsory sports practices. (94)

It is interesting to note that this behaviour is directly related to the way Swartz felt about his father. It is a way of rebelling against his father’s different body. He observes that “part of [his] being so determinedly physically weak was the best way [he] could punish [his] father for being disabled, for not having the body other boys’ fathers had” (104). Leslie’s behaviour could be interpreted as “a passive-aggressive challenge to his often-absent father,” since “a more direct challenge might have been inhibited at least partly by the father’s disabilities” (Segal 226). This behaviour captures the sense that the father’s physical configuration does indeed have an effect on the son and is in fact resented.

Ironically, the children could be viewed as an extension, or proof, of the father’s masculinity. They are, after all, a living confirmation that he can sire able-bodied children, and this is proof not only of his humanity, but also evidence of the ultimate agency associated with masculinity – the siring of healthy, *able-bodied*, offspring. This is fuelled by an insinuation the narrator makes that his father had been regarded “by some as a cripple, *not a real man*, whose wife might, if he could have children, bear his crippled children” (11 my emphasis). For others, therefore, the disability is not only in the father’s foot, but is assumed to have affected even his capacity for fathering able-bodied children, another reflection of the ideology of ability. It is precisely this reading of the disabled body that Alfred Swartz endeavours to disprove. His children are thus living proof of his virility, and to emphasize this point, he encourages the children to like sports. Although the narrator is not particularly fond of these training sessions, the moments are nevertheless cherished memories, times when Alfred Swartz “was enjoying the simple joy of being out with his children” (93). The

narrator thus treasures these moments not so much for the father's display of masculine authority, but rather due to the display of affection. What emerges from his recollection of these moments is an appreciation for the father's display of a mode of masculinity that is not part of the hegemonic ideal, but that nevertheless enables Alfred Swartz to ably fulfil his role as a father, in a manner that remains etched in the author's memory.

The interesting thing is that the threat to the father's masculinity therefore does not come from his disabled body. Rather, it comes from his son's lack of enthusiasm for sports, and ironically, his daughter's remarkable prowess in athletics. According to the narrator, she is "a gifted athlete," (92) and she "ran and ran like the wind" (93). From the father's perspective, the fact that his son displays no interest in sports could be read as deficiency in his bodily configuration preventing him from imparting to his son the love for such activity. The son is in this narrative an extension of his father, a point that is echoed at several points in the text. It is in the son's normative physicality, therefore, that Alfred Swartz expects to achieve masculine feats he himself was denied. The narrator views his father's expectations of him as going beyond that of other fathers. He observes:

My father wanted me to enjoy and be good at sport, not just to continue a family tradition of masculinity, but also so I could do things he couldn't do. He had not been able to play rugby, for example, which was a huge issue for a boy at his colonial school in the 1930s. He wanted me to have the joy of sport, but in some sense he also wanted me to play sport on his behalf. (101)

Although Alfred Swartz is proud of his daughter's athleticism, he nevertheless believes, in patriarchal fashion, that his son holds the key to continuing the family tradition of sportsmanship. That his son fails to uphold this tradition threatens the father's sense of having been an apt masculine role model. In its portrayal of the father-son dynamic, *Able-Bodied* features a remarkable reversal (from *Lyrics Alley*) in the sense that it is a disabled father attempting to impart his ideal of hegemonic masculinity onto the son. It is quite interesting that besides having a history of disability, the family also has a history of very active sportsmen (94). With Leslie, that chain of sports-people is threatened. And with his lack of interest in sports, he threatens to affirm not only his mother's anxiety over having a child who is not 'normal', but also the father's own possible anxiety over having been a capable masculine role model – at least enough to pass on a sense of athletic masculinity to his son. However, the narrator expresses other factors as influencing his lack of interest in sports, among which is an understanding of his body as an extension of his father's: "a key reality of my life is that the way I feel about my body, in my body, for my body, is in some

ways a product of my father's being disabled" (103). Engaging in sports, with the possibility of victory in those activities, seems to him to be a form of rebellion against his father's disabled body, a way of detaching himself from that body which defines him. The son's victories would also be the father's. Whereas active sportsmanship would present the father with a sense of fully realised masculinity (through his son), for Leslie, it would represent triumph "over [his father's] broken and hurt body" (103), which he simply cannot face.

With reference to this last quote, we must remain aware that the text is not merely about Alfred Swartz, but rather about a father's relationship with his son. Carolus van Nijnatten argues that a son's writing of a father's biography serves a more important function than just telling the latter's story. It is, for the son, "an identity shaping process" in which he enters into imagined dialogue with the father (244). This opening of dialogue is a way of seeking closure which could otherwise not be achieved (in most cases) while the father is alive:

In this process of "doubling," the son identifies with the father without wholly surrendering his identity, imagining how he would feel and act in his father's position. This enables the son to escape the circle of recrimination and to see the relationship from a more distant perspective. (van Nijnatten 247)

Some fathers do not realise their son's need for individuality, trying instead to mould them according to their own (the fathers') wishes. The process of penning a biography – as Swartz has done – manifests as a dialogue initiated on more level terrain, without the father's authoritative voice to thwart that of the son. It is therefore a form of narrative enablement for both father and son in the sense that unresolved feelings are encountered and resolved through the process of writing.

In *Able-Bodied*, Alfred Swartz's stoicism and active sportsmanship mask an anxiety about letting the disability deny him full realisation of his masculine selfhood. His unrelenting passion for sports and denial of weakness and pain can be read as a successful endeavour to retain his masculinity and the authority associated with it. Beneath the story of masculinities, however, lies another narrative, which perhaps is the major concern for the author. This is the relationship with his father, a narrative that is presented primarily in the son's voice, with at times a humorous tone employed to describe some noticeably painful memories. As readers, we appreciate the difficulty in narrating some of these memories, given the author's own admission of the risk of offending some members of his family in possibly misrepresenting them (15). In a way, it is this playful, jocular tinge in his writing that draws attention to the difficulty of rendering these scenes in writing. We engage the text in filling in those details

that are veiled by the humour. The voice of the narrator also noticeably contains an infusion of other voices from within and without his family. All these voices play a part in forming the author's own opinion regarding his father's disability. G. Thomas Couser argues that the act of writing "bids to be an agent of recovery as well as self-expression" (*Recovering* 4), which applies to Leslie Swartz in this instance. The narrative functions similar to "successful therapies in breaking the cycle of intergenerational pain" (van Nijnatten 248). That the author manages to pen the story at all is perhaps an indication of a wish to resolve some parts of this relationship; to explain – both to himself and others – the reasons why he acted as he did, and "to repay a debt of gratitude" (251) to his father, expressing many things he was never able to tell his father face to face, including his appreciation for the fact that his father's disability did not stop him from being an enabling and inspiring paternal figure. The result is a memorable story which also provides insight into the role of disability in father-son relationships, a theme to which Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* adds another perspective.

#### **'Useless' bodies and 'kings of women': *Measuring Time***

Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* is a story of two brothers, Mamo and LaMamo, although the narrative privileges the former (we learn of LaMamo's adventures mainly through letters that he sends to his brother). Written in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, the story traces the development of Mamo Lamang in the village of Keti, Nigeria. Of particular importance is how Mamo's affliction with sickle cell anaemia affects his regard for himself as a man.

As in *Able-Bodied* and *Lyrics Alley*, father-son relationships in *Measuring Time* are key to exploring the experiential, particularly in understanding the way masculinity is affected by bodily variation. The plot of *Measuring Time* sets the two brothers alongside each other as contrasts. Suffering from sickle cell anaemia, Mamo is from the start portrayed as the more 'effete' of the two brothers. He is generally weaker and less active than his twin, who displays more traditionally masculine features. To appreciate the connection between bodily difference and masculinity in this text, it is imperative that we do not focus on Mamo alone, but rather study him in comparison to his brother. In addition, the influence of the father also plays an important role in this comparison.

The manner in which the authors juxtapose disabled and non-disabled bodies recalls a number of disability theorists' criticism of the way the disabled body is seen in society. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "normate," for example is an ideal, mythical figure that is supposed to represent the able-bodied in societies, and from which the disabled body departs.

Disability theorist Tom Shakespeare argues that “non-disabled people define themselves as ‘normal’ in opposition to disabled people who are not” (“Disavowal” 292). *Measuring Time* reflects this ideology, in so far as the twins are continually compared in the text. The ‘difference’ in Mamo’s body is highlighted by repeatedly evoking the ‘normalcy’ of his brother.

In fact, Mamo, who is the more central character of the two, is affectionately called “twin” by his aunt, a title which recalls the special sibling relationship he has with his brother, even during the latter’s long absence. However, it is the opinion of their father, Lamang, which brings to the fore the first association of Mamo’s sickle cell disease with effeminacy or a diminishing of masculinity. The figure of Lamang, as the father of the twins, is an important factor in tracing the feelings of inferiority that develop in Mamo’s mind regarding his ailing body. Lamang’s fame and his lack of displays of affection towards his sons are key points that determine not only the attitudes of the sons, but also drive the plot in certain directions. Once it is discovered that Mamo has sickle cell anaemia, for example, Lamang is quick to associate the disease with the twins’ deceased mother. However, his doctor informs him otherwise:

“It is a disease of the blood, hereditary,” the doctor went on.  
 “His mother had it,” Lamang said gruffly.  
 “Not only her. You must also carry a trace of it, that’s the way it works.”  
 “His brother is a healthy, strong boy. He takes after me,” Lamang argued. (21)

In this conversation it is noticeable how Lamang is loath to admit any bodily weakness in his own anatomy. This moment also reveals an instance of anxious masculinity from an able-bodied father nervous about being the source of the ‘imperfection’. For him, the deceased Tabita must be the source of any weakness in the children. To him, bodily debilitation can only be associated with, and stem from, the mother. This recalls Garland-Thomson’s observation that for a long time, the female body and the disabled body have both “been portrayed as helpless, dependent, weak, vulnerable, and incapable bodies” (“Integrating Disability” 79). In Lamang’s eyes, there is an explicit linkage between Mamo’s body and effeminacy. Lamang’s voice in the text is therefore used by Habila to expose such fallacious associations held in various cultural contexts. If we read the text as a heteroglot whole, Lamang’s voice – his very presence – represents a particular reading of Mamo’s body, a reading that exists in the midst of other interpretations of Mamo’s corporeality.

This section of the novel is important not only because it illustrates Lamang's valuing of masculinity, but also because it imprints on Mamo the impression that he is the least favoured of the two sons. Lamang is an imposing male figure, and his achievements in Keti reveal the sort of man who is respected for his masculine prowess. He is, for example, famous for having been a philanderer in his youth, given the title "King of Women" (15). His fame is such that there is a song sung about his ways. The refrain of this song "described how women stood longingly on their doorsteps as he passed, and how mothers locked up their daughters at night to save them from the 'handsome ravisher'" (15). Lamang is definitely a defining presence in the twins' lives, particularly in how he contributes greatly to Mamo's feelings of inferiority. To Lamang, Mamo's is a "weak and useless body" (68). The father's reading of Mamo's body (very similar to the way Mahmoud Bey regards his disabled son in *Lyrics Alley*) informs the way the son feels about himself for a greater part of the narrative. In some parts, the relationship between Mamo and Lamang inversely mirrors that between Leslie Swartz and Alfred Swartz, in terms of how disablement makes complex the father-son relationships at the heart of the narratives. In his memoir, Robert F. Murphy observes that any "[d]amage to the body [...] causes diminution of the self, which is further magnified by debasement by others" (93). For Mamo, such debasement coming from an authority figure who also happens to be a close relation is bound to have an even greater effect on the character. Lamang's words are unlikely to be motivated by love for his sons, but rather by an inexplicable selfishness that drives him to show nothing but contempt for them.

From this early period, Mamo learns to accept his different body. He realises he cannot be as active as his brother, and is therefore driven by a "purposeless rage" (24) and begins keeping an imaginary diary. This is anger that can be directed outwards towards others or inwards towards one's self. What is remarkable about Mamo's anger, however, is that it finds a channel in his creative efforts (again mirroring Nur's experience in *Lyrics Alley*). Although imaginary, Mamo's diary is an entry point into the writing that is going to take up a good part of his adult life. Stories take up most of his free time. His Auntie Marina is partially responsible for turning him in this direction. She introduces him to storytelling, "conjuring mountains and undersea kingdoms with words" (21), effectively showing him a world in which he feels comfortable.

In most African societies, working with words is not the optimal way for a man to display his masculinity (the praise-singing *imbongi* and the *griot* may be notable exceptions). A man might be praised for being able to sing well, but never is that skill seen as a display of

masculinity. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has perhaps one of the best examples of this phenomenon, displayed through Okonkwo's feelings towards his father Unoka. In *Measuring Time*, Mamo too has an inclination towards the arts. Commenting on Mamo's artistic proclivity, critic Madeline Hron calls him the "griot [who] reclaims stories, tradition, and history" (44), accolades that are unlikely to impress his father. In fact, the result of his interest in writing and the village's annual drama performances is to bring him closer to some of the womenfolk in the area, including his Auntie Marina and her fellow amateur actors. His lack of interest in politics and business, on the other hand, only function to increase the estrangement between him and his father.

Writing serves a particularly important role for Mamo. Like Nur in *Lyrics Alley*, telling stories is for Mamo a way of living a life which his body does not permit him to do. Significantly, Mamo does not show interest in his father's political engagements, which increases Lamang's ignorance of his son. Writing is important, since it is Mamo's recourse after failing to fit in with the other youths due to his frailty. His body causes him a lot of embarrassment since he cannot be as physically active as his brother. He notices that his brother and his friends are unable to talk about their adventures when he (Mamo) is around, since he is never part of such activities because of his sickness. And such adventures usually involve actions that determine masculinity, such as hunting. Eventually, "[w]hen he realized that they felt sorry for him, for his illness, he decided to keep away" (38). In hegemonic masculinity, it becomes a requirement that the masculinity be performed, a feat which requires bodily articulation and engagement in certain activities depending on one's particular cultural location. Russell P. Shuttleworth expands on this point, arguing that understanding masculinities as embodied means that one's masculinity has to be "conveyed by one's corporeality and social performances in-the-world" (167). As Thomas J. Gershick notes, "one's sense of self rests precariously upon the audience's decision to validate or reject one's gender performance" (192). Such performances include the activities that LaMamo and his friends talk about, events from which Mamo is excluded.

Indeed, alienation is one key feature that characterises the experiential for Mamo. In the first place, his isolation comes from his ailment, since it limits social interaction, as illustrated in his inability to go hunting with his peers. The departure of his brother also heightens this sense of alienation, since Mamo remains alone in the village. The people around him – Lamang, Auntie Marina, Asabar – are either unwilling or unable to reduce this sense of

alienation. Although writing enables him to escape into another world, this escape is in a way even more isolating, given the low level of literacy in Keti village.

Significantly, Mamo's body places him as the weaker brother. It is LaMamo who must always play the most active roles in their games, LaMamo who receives praise – as rare as it is – from their father, and LaMamo who has not inherited their mother's weakness. LaMamo is able to go hunting and to play soccer, whereas Mamo is left with their Auntie Marina. Eventually, there is an indication that females are more attracted to LaMamo than to the frail Mamo. Mamo's obvious intellectual superiority is not necessarily an advantage to him. In fact, as Christopher Anyokwu argues, "Mamo's [...] attempt to acquire university education, which eventually fails, and his scholarly endeavours are all geared towards fulfilling his dream of *measuring up* to his more physically equipped twin-brother" (9, italics in original).

The relationships that Mamo forms with others are attempts to break this isolation. However, all such relationships inevitably break down or are not intense enough for Mamo's purposes. The most important is the romantic relationship that he forms with Zara, a woman from his childhood who returns to work in Keti. However, Zara is haunted by her previous marriage. The strains of legal tussles after her marriage lead to depression. She eventually leaves Keti for South Africa, effectively leaving Mamo alone. We are informed that Mamo eventually writes a number of biographies, although "this action occurs outside the boundaries of the text and is not indicated as anything more than a desire or fantasy within the diegesis" (Krishnan 191). Krishnan here refers to the narrator's strategy of foreshadowing Mamo's writing of various biographies in the future. The reader never actually sees the texts, as the novel's historical scope does not stretch that far.

In this novel we have again instances of the narrative featuring multiple voices in significant sections of the text. The telling of stories is not only important for Mamo as a character, but is used as Habila's style of filling in gaps in the plot. Because of this, we hear various languages in the story, starting with the mythical rendering of Lamang's past as the "King of Women," to Mamo's own planned retelling of the history of Keti. One significant moment of storytelling concerns Toma, a war veteran who lost his leg in the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970, and is consequently nicknamed "One-leg". In the character of Toma, Habila carries the notion of storytelling a bit further. When the twins' Uncle Haruna returns, traumatised after a seven-year period, it falls to Toma to recount his adventures with Haruna during the war. The narrative indicates that Toma's telling of the stories is a regular occurrence in Keti,

but people still listen to him. During this particular event, for instance, “[p]eople drew near, and though many of them had heard Toma’s civil war stories many times before, today they listened with a new ear” (49). Toma’s stories about war have a particular effect on Mamo and LaMamo. The stories make them feel that it is on the battlefield that they can achieve fame and dignity.

Remarkably, Habila here creates two characters – Toma and Mamo – who are both notable for bodies that do not conform to normativity, and who both resort to working with words. Rather than presenting storytelling as a ‘weaker’ display of masculinity, Habila echoes Achebe’s suggestion that the preservation of history is the most respectable profession among men: “the story[teller] is chief among his fellows [since] only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior” (*Anthills* 124). Although these two characters both resort to storytelling, however, a curious event is how – in spite of their repetitiveness – people tend to flock to hear Toma’s narratives rather than Mamo’s. The primary reason for this is of course the fact that Mamo’s narratives are constructed in well-formed English and are conveyed through media that are not easily accessible (one is an essay that he writes on the history of his village). Furthermore, one has to look at the causes of the two characters’ bodily differences. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, it is indeed possible to encounter hierarchies in disability, with war related disabilities being venerated more than congenital disabilities. The reason for this is that those who suffer injuries in the course of war are seen as once having been able-bodied (*Extraordinary Bodies* 49) and as having made heroic sacrifices for their nation. This scene evokes that of Nur in *Lyrics Alley* discussed earlier, where he regards the soldiers’ ‘marked bodies’ as being of a higher order than his, due to the circumstances of their disablement. In his stories, Toma constructs a narrative of heroism around his disability, a tale which infects the young boys with the desire to attain similar glory.

Their Uncle Haruna, traumatised by the war, cannot remember much. His “mind refused to remember anything that had happened before the day he turned up in Keti” (53). He has delusions and speaks to himself sometimes. In their youth, the twins are not aware of the traumatised mental state of their uncle, nor do they understand that the war has mentally disabled him. To them, the glory of the battlefield and the community’s regard for him as a hero hinders any recognition of the horrors that Haruna has endured. Even after Haruna hangs himself, the twins are unable to realise that that is a clear indication of the destructive effect that war can have on a person who fought in and outlived it.

Haruna is a minor character in the novel. However, in the couple of pages in which he is presented to the reader, we get our first actual glimpse at the setting of war which hovers in the background of the immediate narrative and the memories of some of the characters. When Haruna returns, traumatised, we are for the most part left to fill in the gaps in his story. But even by the end of the story, Haruna's full story is not known. As a result, "everyone in the village still talked about him, about his adventures; imaginary exploits and heroisms were attributed to him by even those who had never seen him" (53). Although this character is never fleshed out, the reader eventually realises that he hints at the horrors of war, while at the same time instilling in the twins the desire to escape from their home. To a limited extent, Haruna also serves a foreshadowing function. In the course of the novel LaMamo's fate appears to echo Haruna's, since he too is disabled in the midst of fighting (he loses an eye), and he eventually dies in Keti, just like his uncle.

Nevertheless, one can read Haruna's muteness alongside Toma's garrulity as significantly highlighting certain aspects of disability in relation to war. Both characters are noticeably scarred by the war. It is clear that Haruna is mentally scarred by his experiences, whereas Toma's war experience leaves him with one leg. But these two disabled characters react differently to their war experiences. Toma talks about these experiences whenever given the chance, whereas Haruna remains mute. This is another clear link to the power of art evoked by the author in the text. In the rhetoric of his oral narratives, Toma finds a way of asserting himself in his immediate society. He is the storyteller that everyone knows. His voicing of the experiential is both to his advantage and that of the listeners, regaled by his stories. Haruna, on the other hand, fails to tell his story. Anthony Paul Kerby argues that the "loss of this ability to narrate one's past is tantamount to a form of amnesia, with a resultant diminishing of one's sense of self" (7). Haruna's muteness is therefore equated to failure to voice out his being. The reception that he receives in Lamang's household appears to echo this interpretation. He is accepted warmly enough, but all his relations want him to talk about his absence before they can fully accept him. The fact that he dies before he can articulate these experiences suggests that one needs to tell one's story in order to survive, something that both Toma and Mamo seem to indicate.

Toma's stories, Uncle Haruna's alleged heroism and the twins' hostility towards their father are some of the factors that convince them to run away from home, seeking the glory that is to be found on the battlefield. A life as a soldier also represents – for Mamo – a chance to

assert the masculinity that has been denied him since birth. Yet Mamo is unable to proceed with the escape plan due to the condition of his body.

The failed adventure – at least for Mamo – has another implication for the novel’s portrayal of the two boys as masculine figures. The ideal of masculinity is the ability to perform. A man must not be passive, but rather active. Physical disability usually results in this ideal not being met. The fact that LaMamo proceeds with the adventure whereas Mamo fails means for Mamo that he has failed in the one thing that would not only have given him freedom from the village and his father, but a chance to prove that he too is a masculine figure. As for Lamang, his only reaction is anger, agonising over what “people would say if [Mamo] had died” (68). So for him what is important is what his sons’ activities might do to his image as a respected man in Keti (echoing the position taken by Mahmoud Bey in *Lyrics Alley*). The journey motif features in many a story of men taking a chance to prove themselves, similar to the walkabout undertaken by Australian aborigines. Undertaking a long journey and returning from it are taken as the marker of a man who has experienced the world and the hardships in it, and survived. Ideally, LaMamo should return to tell of such adventures, but he dies soon after his return to Keti, before telling his story. With this turn of events, Habila subtly challenges the warrior ideal of masculinity, since the survivor is the storyteller, the one regarded as weak.

In her analysis of *Measuring Time*, Madhu Krishnan criticises the novel for lacking closure. So many threads of the story are left unresolved. I am inclined to agree with her conclusion on all counts except for on the portrayal of Mamo’s condition of sickle cell anaemia. Most narratives that feature disabilities or illnesses feature what G. Thomas Couser calls comic plots, narratives of “triumph over adversity” (*Recovering* 5) or the like. In so far as the depiction of Mamo is concerned, *Measuring Time* resists this recipe of “normalcy, injury, recovery” (Riley 25), and instead shows how a character continues to live fully with his illness. At the end of the novel, Mamo outlives his father and his brother, and is set to conserve their memories in his writing, a suggested turn of events that emphasises the continuation of life in Keti.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the experiential in so far as it is centred on masculinity and the disabled body. However, this is by no means the only area which defines the experiential. There are various overlaps and interconnections among the discussed texts that invite

comment. One of these is the sense of alienation that runs through all the texts. In most of these cases, the characters choose to be alone, reflecting a need to be away from contexts that reinforce their ‘difference’. For those whose disabilities are not congenital, like Musa Zulu, the isolation also reveals the difficult process of adapting to the ‘new’ body, and to the fact that their society will most likely revise the disabled person’s membership in various social units. The fact that this isolation is often lessened or eliminated by the end of the narratives appears to be a way in which the writers demonstrate the fact that disability is not an isolated or irreversibly isolating experience, but one that occurs in the midst of – and is sometimes defined by – other people. Another recurring structural overlap in the texts is the father-son dynamic in the construction of masculinities. In *Lyrics Alley*, *Measuring Time*, and *Able-Bodied*, disability is a central defining factor in the development of those relationships, and gives a glimpse into cultural definitions of masculinity, definitions that significantly often fail to include the disabled body in configurations of ideal masculinity. By highlighting such limited and limiting viewpoints, the texts take significant steps towards a reconfiguration of some of their respective societies’ misconceptions about the functionality of the disabled body. These are just two of many overlapping experiential elements that occur in the texts. Other overlaps emerge in subsequent discussions.

## Chapter 2: Violence: Contextualising Disabilities and Exploring Spaces of Dis/Enablement

*Wamisala anaona nkhondo*

[It is the mad man who saw the approach of war]

(Chewa proverb)

### Introduction

In this chapter, the study shifts in focus from close examination of the characters to a consideration of represented contexts as a way of exploring the social dimension of disablement depicted in selected texts. These texts indicate that the social dimension of disability ought not to be limited to the other characters with whom the disabled character interacts, but should be extended to the various structures that disabled people encounter. The authors depict the way these characters' disabilities are highlighted not only in their interactions with other people, but in their encounters with disabling environments, or with social structures that fail to accommodate disabled characters' needs.

This shifting of focus away from the body does not entail a neglect of the material reality of disability. On the contrary, it illuminates additional ways in which authors and filmmakers depict the disabled body in their productions, especially by exploring its interactions with other features of the environment, including various further determinants of marginalisation. In the selected texts, violence emerges as a major causative and amplifying force in relation to disablement in colonial and postcolonial African contexts. The chapter examines Ousmane Sembène's film *Camp de Thiaroye* (1989) and three novels: John Miles's *Deafening Silence* (1996), Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* (2006). The argument of this chapter is that in various African contexts, socio-political violence is portrayed as a key factor in either causing or sustaining disability, and can be seen as further disabling the disabled. I examine the manifestation of violence in its various forms in these texts, including structural violence and the violence of language, in addition to its more obvious manifestation of inflicting physical harm. It is particularly interesting to examine the way the affected characters resist some of the attempts to dehumanise them through various kinds of social disablement.

Each of the selected texts addresses the link between violence and disablement in different ways, containing nuances that expand our understanding of disablement while at the same

time emphasising the uniqueness of various experiences. In the film *Camp de Thiaroye*, the first work discussed here, Sembène exposes overlaps between racial discrimination and disablement in colonial Africa through the character of Pays. The examination of overlaps between racial violence and disablement is continued in my discussion of *Deafening Silence*, where the author weaves together apartheid racism and violence with the disabling of the central character. Following this is an exploration of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, which brings to the argument another dimension of state-sanctioned brutality (torture and disablement) and the resilience of the human body and spirit in the face of such violation. The discussion ends with *Moses, Citizen & Me*. In its depiction of the Sierra Leone post-war moment, Jarrett-Macauley's narrative powerfully challenges conventional stereotypes of the ex-child soldier as a dangerous and othered being. All these texts are marshalled to advance the argument that socio-political violence and disability are often inextricably linked with the former as a disabling as well as disenabling factor in the African imaginary.

The term disablement is one I employ as a way of conceptualizing a form of social disablement portrayed in the texts explored. Disability can be used in two different senses: "It can refer to a social status and a cultural category or one's bio-medical status. In disability theory, a second usage of disability emerges – a restriction on activity generated by an impairment transformed by a particular socio-cultural context into a disability" (Freund 691-692). For purposes of this study, *disablement* emerges when the second usage (of disability) is stretched to encompass a restriction on activity caused by a particularly violent environment. Disablement is therefore read as existing on a broader scale, to the extent of affecting a larger group of people, even a nation. It is firmly located in the social space, and is thus not necessarily tied to impairment since, after all "those who are not impaired may be disabled in a particular temporal-spatial context" (Freund 693). For purposes of drawing a distinction (from disablement), the term *disablement* is used to denote this broader form of social disablement.

The introduction of this notion should not be surprising since the term *disability* itself has been known to be unstable (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* xv; Davis, *Bending* 23). Given the warning that some of the established disability studies vocabulary might not be easily transferable to the postcolonial context (Barker and Murray 230), it entails that some culturally influenced understandings of disablement may not accord with those firmly established in the Western canon. The discussed texts certainly lend themselves to various interpretations of disablement. Such interpretations should not be based on the body alone.

After all, as Tobin Siebers argues, “it makes no sense to link oppression to physical and mental characteristics of the body, visible or not, because the cause of oppression usually exists in the social or built environment and not in the body” (Siebers, "Masquerade" 4). The environment can be disabling not only in the literal sense of directly causing or affecting impairment, but also in stifling activity among members of the population beyond those living with bodily impairment. The spaces of violence portrayed in the selected texts display this broader notion of disablement.

In situating the characters in these texts within their social and cultural contexts it is important to bear in mind their historical settings. Among the selected texts, some are set during times of war, whereas others feature politically tense environments. These are the disabling environments examined here, where socio-political violence manifests as both a leading cause of disability as well as a structural factor that serves to keep the disabled in the position of othered individuals. *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, for example, depicts events surrounding the final days of Emperor Haile Selassie's rule in Ethiopia and the onset of the Derg tyranny. *Camp de Thiaroye* has a Second World War context, being a rendition of the fate of the repatriated African *tirailleurs* based at a demobilisation camp in Dakar at the end of the war. *Deafening Silence* presents a chapter in apartheid South Africa's history, focusing on the character of the black police officer Tumelo John Moleko. Lastly, Jarrett-Macauley's novel presents a perspective on Sierra Leonean society in the aftermath of the 1991-2002 civil war through the eyes of its expatriate, ex-centric narrator.

With violence at the centre of all these texts, it is tempting to subject them to a reading through the lens of trauma theory. While holding the potential to unravel particular aspects related to the characters' trauma, such a reading risks detracting from a focus on dis(en)ablement in the texts. Instead, my aim is to pursue the examination of violence as it is linked to disenablement, instead of a perspective influenced by trauma theory. Significantly, as illustrated in the chapter, this position permits an in-depth exploration of the characters' traumatizing circumstances. At the same time, examining the links between violence and dis(en)ablement permits the examination of cultural interpretations of disablement that are at the centre of the thesis.

Violence manifests in the texts in a variety of complex forms. As Colin Barnes notes, history is replete with connections between disability and violence, from the ancient Greeks and Romans who advocated the murder of disabled infants, to genocide victims of the Holocaust

(25). My usage of the term “violence” is in reference to both its immediate meaning as “the intentional rendering of hurt on another human being” (Riches, "Anthropology" 4) as well as extended connotations of the term which “refer to representational ideas or else correspond to situational experiences” (Riches, "Aggression, War, Violence" 292). The theoretical understanding of violence is based on Fanon’s thoughts on the subject. Although his focus is violence in the colonies, his ideas are also useful in highlighting the prevalence of violence in the postcolony. In her discussion of Fanon, Chantal Kalisa observes:

Fanon identified three main types of violence in the colonial system – physical, structural and cultural – along with their psychological and cathartic effects. Physical violence refers to the use of military and police power to conquer and “pacify” indigenous peoples and to force them to accept the colonial order. Structural violence is the condition of social injustice and is composed of binary oppositions, one inferior and powerless and the other assumed to be superior and powerful [...] Cultural violence consists of the colonial authorities’ negation of the culture of the colonized. (Kalisa 8)

Fanon’s understanding of violence is not without its critics.<sup>9</sup> But his model assists in understanding the sense of disablement that is caused by violence. As the texts discussed here illustrate, these forms of violence are not exclusive to the colonial world, but also exist in the postcolony. The socio-political nature of these violent contexts is evident in the presence of government and anti-government machinery (in the form of soldiers or police hit squads) as the main agents of violent disablement *and* disablement.

Considering the setting of the texts under study, socio-political violence could be identified as a disabling element. Indeed, as Clare Barker points out, “[p]ost)colonial histories are punctuated by disabling events such as war, population displacement and civil unrest, as well as on-going poverty” (“Interdisciplinary Dialogues” 16), some of which feature in the selected texts. In the narratives discussed, it is not just the physical or mental disability that results from the violence, but also profound disablement that affects entire populations of people. Out of these dire situations emerge particular characters who, while themselves affected by violence, eventually come to symbolise the resilience of humanity.

### **Colonial contexts of disablement: *Camp de Thiaroye***

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon observes that violence is an integral part of both colonisation as well as decolonisation processes. One fundamental feature of the encounter

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<sup>9</sup> Major critiques of Fanon’s theory of violence include Hannah Arendt’s *On Violence* (1970) and Nguyen Nghe’s “*Fanon et les problèmes de l’indépendance*” (1963).

between the settler and the native, he observes, is that it “was marked by violence” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 36). The writer emphasises the point that since colonialism was itself enforced through violence, violence can also be used to dislodge it:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. (Fanon, *The Wretched* 40)

Fanon’s “Concerning Violence” helps one to contextualise the violence evident in some of Ousmane Sembène’s films, including *Emitai* and *Camp de Thiaroye*. The latter film highlights the centrality of violence in constructing relations between the coloniser and the colonised. It is with this film that the discussion commences its exploration of the links between violence and dis(en)ablement.

*Camp de Thiaroye* is one of Ousmane Sembène’s earlier films, produced in 1987. It is based on an episode of colonial history, depicting the French massacre of African soldiers – *les tirailleurs sénégalais* – during their stay at a demobilisation camp in Senegal on their return from fighting for and with the French in the Second World War. Sembène’s primary aim in the film is to bring to light a part of history previously kept hidden from the world – “to make sure people knew my history right,” in his own words (Gadjigo 68). The film unveils the racism that characterised French colonial policy. In *Camp de Thiaroye*, this racism is seen in the conversations of most of the French soldiers, in the unjust payment of the African soldiers’ wages, in the contemptuous treatment of the *tirailleurs*, and ultimately in the decision by French authorities to shell the camp.

Such is the importance of the Thiaroye massacre in African history that it has inspired at least seven artistic renderings, including a poem by négritude pioneer Léopold (Sédar) Senghor (Parent 6). There is also some critical and analytical scholarship on the event. One of the most detailed records for the actual event is Myron J. Echenberg’s “Tragedy at Thiaroye: The Senegalese Soldiers’ Uprising of 1944” (1978). His chapter provides a detailed background to the massacre, reading it as a labour protest. Scholarship on Sembène’s *Camp de Thiaroye* has dwelt on various features, including in-depth character analysis and historical accuracy. Femi Okiremuete Shaka’s study, for instance, while drawing on historical documents, also focuses on Sergeant Diatta and Pays. His analysis highlights the complexity of these two characters, indicating how they are central to the film’s message. His main argument is that

the tragic events of the film illustrate why Africans could not differentiate between the French colonial policies of Vichy and those of de Gaulle.<sup>10</sup> In a doctorate dissertation, Sabrina Parent argues that re-enactments of the Thiaroye massacre in artistic works serve to anchor the events in the collective memory of West African people, while at the same time, due to the language of these works, supplementing (and perhaps correcting) official records of French officials. Other critics, however, focus on Sembène's liberal distortion of historical fact for his artistic purposes. Njeri Ngugi, for instance, holds that Sembène's style of presentation permits him to emphasise the humanity of the African soldiers, making the audience empathise with them in their moment of betrayal. Kenneth Harrow is more critical, questioning the directors' deliberate omission of the fact that some *tirailleurs* were complicit in the massacre, operating the artillery used to shell the camp. Joseph Gugler also joins this chorus, arguing that Sembène and his co-director Thierno Faty Sow fail to acknowledge that the massacre was in response to the soldiers' mutinous action.

None of these critics dwell at length on the subject of disability, even though it is a recurring subject in a number of Sembène's films, though often featured as a trope for a more (to the director) pressing theme. Such films include *Xala* (1975) and *Guelwaar* (1992). In the former, the main character is afflicted with impotence. The same film also features a number of physically disabled beggars who are central to the plot. *Guelwaar* features a physically disabled teenage boy, Aloys, the son of the title character. Sembène's concern with the body is also seen in his final film *Moolaadé* (2004), an indictment of female circumcision, set in a village. Out of all his films, *Camp de Thiaroye* is the only one that provides a sustained depiction of mental disability.<sup>11</sup>

This particular film permits the reading of colonial violence through the lens of disability studies, with focus on the character of Pays. This requires the recognition of at least three

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<sup>10</sup> The Vichy regime emerged in France after its occupation by Germany in 1940, during the Second World War. Disagreeing with the armistice which was formed with Germany, General Charles de Gaulle escaped France and set up the Free France movement, which continued fighting against Germany and the other Axis nations. As Sembène reveals in *Camp de Thiaroye* (and *Emitai*), there was very little distinguishing the two sides in attitudes towards Africans. This background enables us to understand better the poor relations between Captain Raymond (who had fought for de Gaulle) and the other French officers, who support the Vichy regime.

<sup>11</sup> Sembène's first depiction of a mentally disabled *tirailleur* actually exists in *White Genesis* (1972), and its film version, *Niaye* (1964). The novella features Tanor Ngone Diob, who had fought for the French in Vietnam and Algeria. He returns from the war mentally scarred, and eventually murders his father in the story. Of this character, David Murphy writes: "His confused ramblings serve as a constant reminder of the violence of colonialism and its role in the destruction of the traditional African way of life. In one character, Sembène expresses both the pain and aggression of colonialism: a man whose only means of expression is through violence" (*Sembene* 61). Although Tanor is a minor character, it is easy to see how Sembène develops this character model for the role of Pays in *Camp de Thiaroye*.

interlaced spaces of dis(en)ablement in the film. The first space is the Second World War, which was characterised by prolonged violence, the legacy of which is personified in the character and conduct of Pays. The racism in Dakar also forms a space of disablement, especially with regard to relations between the white officers and their black counterparts. Thirdly, the disabling power of ableism is illustrated in the way Pays is treated by his black colleagues. By focusing on the portrayal of Pays from the beginning of the film up until the massacre, the study illustrates how the disabled body is evoked to demonstrate and challenge the disabling spaces of physical violence, racial contempt, and ableism.

The most explicit form of violence depicted in the film is physical violence. This is also tied to racism. Pays and two unnamed injured soldiers serve as reminders of the violence of war. Pays's mental disablement is a direct result of that violence. The injured soldiers at the camp are therefore visual reminders of the war as a space or organ of disablement at both mental and physical levels.<sup>12</sup> This is a point emphasised by the fact that they were recruited into the army as colonial subjects, fighting in a war that was not really theirs.<sup>13</sup> However, the wartime context of violence is presented only in retrospect and peripherally. Sabrina Parent argues that there are some minor scenes in the film that constitute a "crescendo of violence" (132), a sequence of scenes of moral and physical violence that foreshadow the massacre of the soldiers. What she calls moral violence is captured in the humiliation that the soldiers have to endure. The symbolic foregrounding of violence includes the graphic slaughter of a sheep in the camp. According to Parent, "the disgust and repulsive feelings experienced during the sheep's slaughter announce the intensity of the emotions that the massacre of Thiaroye should evoke" (133). Similarly, seen later in the film, the assault on Sergeant Diatta also foregrounds the massacre.

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<sup>12</sup> There is no shortage of depictions of Africans returning from fighting in the two World Wars. It is a generally underexplored phenomenon in literary studies. On the African-American literary scene the mentally disabled Shadrack in Toni Morrison's *Sula* comes to mind. In African literature, in addition to Sembène's Pays (*Camp de Thiaroye*) and Tanor Ngone Diob (*White Genesis/Niaye*), one could mention Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1990), Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007) and the Caine Prize winning "Bombay's Republic" (2011) by Rotimi Babatunde as more recent representations in the tradition of the soldier returning from war; a tradition whose foundation rests in films such as Ousmane Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye*. Besides cases of disablement – of which Pays is an obvious example – perhaps one of the greatest impacts on the minds of the Africans who took part in the war is their realization of their own worth as human beings, signalling the first sparks of mental decolonisation. As a result, agitation within the colonies increased upon the return of these men from the wars, especially after the Second World War. *Camp de Thiaroye* exemplifies this awareness through the *tirailleurs'* resistance to the injustice of unfair wage payment by the French.

<sup>13</sup> This is a point that is emphasised in *Emitai* (1971), a film that is regarded as a prequel to *Camp de Thiaroye*.

This “crescendo of violence” could be extended to include the racism evident in Dakar. The opening scene of the film conveys the link between physical violence and racism quite well. The soldiers are disembarking off a ship at Dakar, greeted by two separate crowds of people on the docks, a scene in which “the cheering Whites are standing some *safe* meters apart from the Africans” (Downing 197, my italics). The scene is a powerful opening to the film, immediately introducing several thematic foci, including that of contamination. The separate groups convey the sense that Africans are regarded as contaminants to the French, and must be kept apart, almost quarantined. This idea of contamination is reinforced by the physical space of colonial Dakar, where a policy of segregation is enforced. This is a world, to quote Fanon, “divided into compartments... cut in two [and] inhabited by two different species” (*The Wretched* 38-40), reflected in the separate welcoming parties. This separation emphasises the otherness ascribed to the Senegalese indigenes. Sergeant Diatta’s embarrassing episode at le Coq Hardi further emphasises this point. Diatta visits the brothel for a drink. Mistaking him for an African-American, the owner of the bar welcomes him inside. However, once he is revealed as an African (through his choice of drink), he is rudely evicted from the place. Racial attitudes portrayed in the film are therefore intricately bound up with – and certainly cause – the disabling atmosphere that victimises the Senegalese indigenes. In this world, white authority is entrenched and the idea of the indigenous Senegalese person as an inferior figure is deeply etched in the mind-sets of both the white and the black populace. With *Camp de Thiaroye*, therefore, Sembène takes the opportunity to paint a sketch of colonial Africa under the French, revealing the hypocrisy and brutality of the *mission civilisatrice*, seen here in the actions and words of the French officials in Dakar.<sup>14</sup>

Although not as central a character as Sergeant Diatta, Pays fits into this discussion as a focaliser of these varied threads of violence. His centrality emanates not only from the fact that all these forms of violence affect him in one way or another, but most importantly, in the realisation that he is presented as a resisting force to all of them. In spite of being labelled the mad man, “his derangement, however agonizing to him, has locked onto the truth in a way that not one of the other African protagonists [in the film] has succeeded in doing” (Downing 210). It is a truth that he only shares with the viewer, thus deepening the emotional tie

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<sup>14</sup> The French strategy of colonisation had as its central point the policy of assimilation, which involved the exporting of French culture to the colonies, in an attempt to turn the colonised peoples into French citizens. As people like Sembène were to find out, however, assimilation did not remove racial discrimination. In his biography of the filmmaker, Samba Gadjigo writes that among the most painful experiences that Sembène underwent was “segregation against the Negroes, at the very moment when the latter were shedding their blood to defend the ‘fatherland’” (51). The segregation suffered by the black people, also reflected in this film, indicates the hypocrisy of the French and the double-standards of the assimilation policy.

constructed with this particular character. Pays is portrayed as a formidable figure against racist discrimination, ableist prejudice, as well as physical violence.

The other space of disablement is found in ableist attitudes in the camp. In the presence of his colleagues, Pays finds filial acceptance, reflecting the argument that in colonial societies, “the need to objectify and distance the ‘Other’ in the form of the madman or the leper, was less urgent in a situation in which every colonial person was in some sense, already ‘Other’” (Vaughan 10). In spite of their acceptance of him as one of their own, the other soldiers nevertheless speak of Pays as a “cracked” individual, referring to his mental instability. This shows that their acceptance of him is tainted by an ableist mentality, and this attitude disables him more than anything else. This attitude contributes to their death at the end, as they do not heed Pays’s warnings. All these soldiers have experienced violence on the battlefield. Pays, however, has suffered even more, having lost his faculty of speech, and according to most of his colleagues, his mind. His traumatised state additionally identifies him as an exceptionally sensitive man. Therefore, violence is central to his disablement, and possibly also contributes to his mistrust of the white man. As the end of the film indicates, this mistrust is well-founded.

Sembène’s choice for this character’s name is deliberate, and further illustrates his centrality to the narrative. The word *pays* means “country” or “land” in French. Sembène explains in an interview that it is actually meant to refer to the entire continent:

Pays is Africa. He has been abused and traumatized. He can’t talk. He is alive, he can look and see, he can touch, and he can see the future. He is the beholder of the drama of the past, on the concentration camps of colonization, very disciplined, very alone, very solitary, but he can’t express it. (Owoo 29)

The name therefore has connotations of homeland. It indicates how Pays strengthens the theme of belonging that is evoked by the soldiers’ presence in Dakar. The greatest irony is reflected in the fact that the one person whose name is associated with home is the one who is the most restless at the camp, the one who feels least at home. In one memorable scene, Corporal Diarra attempts to allay Pays’s fears by pouring soil into his hand and telling him “[h]ere we are on African soil, you are no longer a prisoner”. Seen in this light, Pays’s name is ironic, since the camp strongly evokes memories of imprisonment in him. Another dimension of this irony emerges from the realisation that Pays is the only black soldier with a French name. The French policy of assimilation ideally extended citizenship to its colonial subjects. The name “Pays” evokes this idea of citizenship, with France as the mother country.

Having a French name would naturally suggest that Pays is the most likely to identify France as the mother country, yet he is the one bearing the deepest mistrust of the French – a point that is also reflected in his defiant donning of the German SS helmet, a visual motif with which he “effectively ‘dons’ the mantle of opposition to French rule in Africa” (Murphy, *Sembène* 164). Lastly, the most powerful effect of this name on the viewer, as shown in Sembène’s words above, is that (as opposed to several colleagues who are named according to their countries of origin – there is a Gabon, a Niger, and a Congo among the troops) here is one whose name appears to embrace all of them, in whom we find “the concentrated experiences of all [his] fellow soldiers of the war in which some of them fought and died, but would prefer to escape from and make merry” (Owoo 29). The disabled Pays embodies the disablement of the African people caused by colonialism; the continent that has been “abused and traumatized”. Representing all of them, he nevertheless remains the most isolated.

Focusing on both the material reality and symbolic significance of Pays’s character, an intersectional approach enables us to appreciate the way Sembène weaves together various axes of difference. Pays’s disablement has occurred as a result of horrors witnessed at Buchenwald, a fact that is made evident to the viewer on Pays’s first appearance.<sup>15</sup> In this scene, he seems shocked by the similarity of the camp at Thiaroye to the concentration camp at Buchenwald. Fear is clearly indicated on his face, even as he traces his fingers along the wire fence, as if to confirm this unwelcome reality. The comparison is cemented later by flashbacks of people shot and killed whilst attempting escape from German concentration camps. With regard to the material nature of his disability (as opposed to its symbolic significance), Pays is among those that Cindy LaCom calls “doubly colonized” (138). She decries postcolonial scholarship’s disregard for “that colonized subject who is Other in terms of body and voice [...] made doubly Other by means of her disability” (LaCom 138). LaCom’s focus is on characters like Pays, and it is significant that she notes the two spheres of oppression that affect such characters. Pays’s body, therefore, is a site upon which various kinds of disablement are constructed. An intersectional approach is applicable in this case, as it emerges “whenever two or more social categories are analysed in relation to power and subordination” (Rigoni 836). In *Camp de Thiaroye*, the two categories are Pays’s mental

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<sup>15</sup> Myron Echenberg reports that as POWs during the Second World War, the *tirailleurs* were treated especially brutally by the Germans. The reasons for such harsh treatment include the fact that, in the First World War, “some French officers unscrupulously manipulated the image of ferocious African soldiers” in order to strike fear into the Germans (*Colonial Conscripts* 94).

difference – which manifests in his unusual conduct – on the one hand, and his race on the other. The first category alienates him from some of the characters who consider themselves normal in the film. Although he enjoys some camaraderie with his comrades, at times they still regard him as odd. In the second category, what is emphasized is his solidarity with the other black soldiers, especially in fighting the injustice of the unfair wages. Intersectionality theory suggests that the form of discrimination, or disablement experienced by a character such as Pays is not simply an aggregate of attitudes based on his race and his psychological disability. Rather, the two have effects on each other. A similar argument is forwarded by Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, who argue that, even in the pursuit of overlaps between two (or more) domains of marginalised experience, the researcher should resist the temptation to create hierarchies of difference (129). Instead, like in the case of *Camp de Thiaroye*, most of these differences mutually affect each other. This resonates with disability studies scholar Mark Sherry's warning that "[p]ostcolonialism should not be understood as simply a metaphor for the experience of disability; nor should the terms 'colonialism' or 'disability' be rhetorically employed as a symbol of the oppression involved in a completely different experience" (10). Instead, the discussion pursues these various areas of experience as they coalesce in the solitary, but complex character of Pays.

It is worth exploring these intersections in greater detail. In her seminal essay on intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that gender and race are formative of black women's experiences of oppression, and that the overlapping ways in which these loci of oppression operate are often not sufficiently mapped (1244). Most texts on intersectionality theory published since have tended to focus on the experiences of black women as "prototypical intersectional subjects" (Nash 4), examining the way various axes of difference overlap with gender to form uniquely marginalising experiences. However, intersectionality is also applicable to other overlapping experiences such as disability and race. For instance, it is acknowledged that "in concrete experiences of oppression, being oppressed [...] as 'a Black person' is always constructed and intermeshed in other social divisions (for example, gender, social class, disability status, sexuality, age, nationality, immigration status, geography, etc.)" (Yuval-Davis 195). In short, various forms of oppression can co-exist, and even affect each other (Hill Collins 63).

In the colonized and disabled person, one finds a character potentially facing different types of marginalised experience. Such is the position of Pays. On the one hand, Pays is 'different' on the basis of his mental disability, and on the other, he is the quintessential African othered

by people like Captain Labrousse and the other white French officers. LaCom offers one unique way of reading the colonized disabled body. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, LaCom interprets such bodies as crucially informing what the former calls "the third dimension", which is the *in-between* region that emerges once the Self/Other binary opposite is disrupted. She argues that "the disabled body multiplies the possible terms of disavowal for both the colonizer and the colonized; because disability can be a more evident signifier even than the color of one's skin, it becomes a visual means by which to define normalcy and, by extension, nation" (LaCom 140). This is a compelling argument, emphasising the point that disability is sometimes used to define normalcy. But in this case, it is not only the disability that is the visual marker of difference – the man's skin colour is also visible. This perspective therefore highlights the "doubly colonized" (138) position that the disabled character occupies in the colonial state.

LaCom's perspective can still be applied to a reading of Pays's position in *Camp de Thiaroye*. As one of the *tirailleurs*, he is among those "ambiguous figures [...] viewed both as agents of French colonialism [...] and also as its victims, especially in relation to the First and Second World Wars, in which the *tirailleurs* gave their lives for the metropolitan 'homeland', only to discover their status as mere colonial subjects once the war was over" (Murphy, "Homeland?" 57-58). Existing in this already ambiguous role, Pays's position is further rendered ambivalent by his relationship with his colleagues, which is simultaneously one of acceptance and denigration. For instance, when faced with a common foe in the figure of the French officers, Pays is embraced by his colleagues (to the extent of placing a captive French General under his watch). However, once they believe that their full pay is forthcoming, they revert to regarding him as the "cracked" individual. For this reason, Pays experiences a unique form of disablement from his fellow soldiers. Although he is not fully one of them, his presence as a "cracked" person enables his colleagues to affirm their normalcy (their 'wholeness'), and by extension, their humanity and dignity against their oppressors. Pays's ambivalent position therefore reflects the complexity of the character's role, while also problematizing any attempt to categorise him in the neat slot of 'colonial subject', since (as Ania Loomba observes) madness is "a transgression of supposed group identities" (139). Loomba's statement is in reference to the prevailing attitude among colonial psychologists', specifically regarding their attempts to explain the colonialist who "[went] native" (139) or the colonised subject who displayed anti-colonial attitudes, both of these

being behavioural tendencies marked as non-conformist. Similarly, Pays's mental disability situates him on the periphery of the group of African soldiers.

Identifying Pays's occupation of Bhabha's "third dimension" is not the only interpretation that an intersectional approach offers. Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear argue that as constructs, race and disability indeed intersect and one way in which this is evident is in "[c]olonial ideologies [which conceived] of the colonised races as intrinsically degenerate [and] sought to bring these 'bodies' under control via segregation and/or destruction" (133). In addition, "[d]isability related labels [...] were often seen as synonymous with bodies marked oppressively by race" (Erevelles and Minear 133). *Camp de Thiaroye* illustrates these practices to a shocking degree, most explicitly in the behaviour of Captain Labrousse, who insists that the natives are merely "big children", a label deliberately meant to indicate that the African men have the intellectual capacity of infants. In his primitivization and infantilization of the soldiers, Labrousse fails to appreciate that they are mature men in their own contexts, whose experiences have exposed them to the reality that they are no different from their white compatriots.<sup>16</sup> His opinion therefore reflects the eugenics-fuelled belief in the degeneracy of the racial other, and it is such attitudes that eventually "served to justify the violence of colonialism" (Erevelles 142).

This discussion of *Camp de Thiaroye* is an attempt to locate the film among other texts in this thesis that are seen depicting "the transgressive potential of different bodies" (LaCom 138). Interestingly, it is not Pays who changes in the film, but rather the viewer's assessment of him. As opposed to other film protagonists who develop in the course of the narrative, Pays's steadfast position, even as he is ridiculed by both his colleagues and the white French officers, remains in the mind of the viewer even after the credits have rolled. His body is thus positioned as a site where different spaces of marginalisation are played out and challenged.

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<sup>16</sup> One of the effects of the Second World War was to make colonial subjects realize the illusory nature of the colonialists' claimed superiority. As a result, war veterans were also less subservient than they had been prior to the war. They differentiated themselves from the veterans of the First World War. Echenberg cites one survivor of the Thiaroye massacre as stating: "We were not like the veterans of 1914-1918. We had our eyes open. We were not prepared to be treated like sheep" ("Tragedy" 124). Similarly, Michael Crowder observes that the war was key to immense changes in the social setup of the colonies: "the war brought into question the whole fabric of the [colonial masters'] authority. Not only did [the African soldiers] hear denunciations of the methods of their colonial rulers from German propaganda [...], but through American and to a lesser extent, Soviet sources, they became increasingly familiar with arguments about the basic 'immorality' of imperialism [...]. For the prestige of the white man, on which colonial rule was so intimately based, the spectacle of Frenchmen attacking fellow Frenchmen and of France under occupation by another European nation was particularly damaging" (610-611).

This is because, due to his vigilance and ambivalent position, Sembène portrays him as perhaps the most ‘able’ character in the film, forcing the viewer to re-examine assumptions associated with disability. The climax of the film when the soldiers are killed is as deeply moving as it is controversial. To summarise, the soldiers stage a protest in the camp when they are given less back pay than is due to them after fighting in the war. In anger, they hold a French general hostage, until he promises to give them their full pay within three days. Soon after his release, the African soldiers are attacked with tanks at the command of the French, the action of the ex-POWs having been declared mutinous (Echenberg, "Tragedy" 116). As noted earlier, the depiction of this moment in *Camp de Thiaroye* has attracted some criticism for being historically inaccurate. Although this criticism may be valid, it does not diminish the shocking effect of the raw violence presented as the camp is destroyed in the night. Crucially, it is a moment that fuses the aforementioned spaces of violence – raw, ruthless violence and the racial attitude that fuels it – with a background of discrimination and administrative injustice. It is in this moment that we notice the conflating of the racialized body and the disabled body into one. After all, any form of anti-colonial resistance, where the colonial subject would attempt to “[cross] the colonial boundary that demarcated him/her from the European male self” was deemed “madness, dependency or infantile regression” (Lomba 139).

Focusing on Pays in the discussion of this film, and unveiling the way in which his character draws attention to several variant themes of the narrative, affords a more intimate look at the tragic events of 1<sup>st</sup> December 1944. He is the first character the viewer empathises with, as the realisation sinks in that he is not as “cracked” as his colleagues assume, but is instead the only one in their midst to recognise the camp for what it really is – the place of their death. And it is this character’s death that is the most tragic, since he had tried to warn his colleagues of the danger they were in. The moment of death in this film is the culmination of those strings of violence that are threaded together from the beginning. In the treatment of Pays we find a fusion of racist discrimination, colonial violence as well as ableism. The unexpected twist is that Sembène uses the disabled, voiceless character to counter racist and ableist assumptions. In the end it is this character’s presence (and death) that endures in the mind.

### **Apartheid and intra-police violence: *Deafening Silence***

Racism similarly emerges as the dominant theme in John Miles's *Deafening Silence*. The novel offers insight into how disabling violence can be interlaced with racial oppression in an environment such as apartheid South Africa – something of a parallel to its interlacing with colonial racism in Sembène's film. The text is an example of faction – it fictionalises events that actually occurred in South Africa. It is the story of Tumelo John Moleko, a black police officer who is both a witness to and a fatality of the injustices of the South African police system under apartheid. In the course of his duties at Hammanskraal Police Training College, Moleko is assaulted by his senior officer, who accuses him of being “cheeky.” This word is used numerous times by various white policemen in the text, in reference to Moleko. The “cheeky” African, observes Flora Veit-Wild, was most often “the African who refused to be the Other” (15). Moleko's resistance to this othering is both the cause of the never-ending antagonism of his superiors and his isolation. The assault eventually results in Moleko becoming deaf in his left ear. The story revolves around his attempts to seek justice for this attack, in the face of opposition from his white superiors as well as other black policemen in the force. It ends with Moleko and his wife being murdered by members of a secret grouping within the police force.<sup>17</sup>

As in Sembène's film, disablement in Miles's novel can be approached by considering different levels of violence that affect the main character. The first has to do with the violence that Moleko witnesses or hears of within the country. The second sphere of violence is that enacted through the very language used by certain parties in the text, meant to render others sub-human. At the third level we find the most obvious form of violence – the physical violence that happens to the protagonist. Moleko is a victim of violence at the hands of his superior, and later at the hands of his colleagues – treatment which culminates in his and his wife's murders by fellow policemen. I argue in this section that these three levels have as

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<sup>17</sup> Tumelo John Moleko is the name that John Miles chooses to represent the real life person Sergeant F. R. Motasi (Van Vuuren 2006). His story was one of those heard during the hearings of the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at which several people gave testimony, including Motasi's son Tshidiso (who appears briefly under the same name in the novel). The official details of Motasi and his wife Irene's murder are contained in the Truth and Reconciliation of South Africa Hearings and Final Report AC/2001/010 (<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans/pta/pta.htm>; <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/decisions/2001/ac21010.htm>), including testimony from Motasi's mother-in-law. The case is also discussed in Antjie Krog's book, *Country of My Skull* (1998) (where she uses the name “Mutase” instead of “Motasi”), a record of her experience as a journalist reporting on the hearings. For further details on the case, see Pauw (2006), Du Bois-Pedain (2007), and Flanery (2010). John Boorman's cinema adaptation of Krog's text, *In My Country* (2004), also offers a somewhat fictionalised and inaccurate account that includes Motasi's case.

their focalising centre the solitary figure of Tumelo John Moleko, and together link race and disablement at a level beyond that of this individual.

The violence enacted on Moleko can be read as emblematic of other interrelated forms of violence. The novel is aptly entitled *Deafening Silence*, meant to reflect not only the silence that develops in the protagonist's ear, but also the 'deafness' of the white authorities in the story to his protestations of injustice. Ultimately, we realise that Moleko's plight is applicable to that of all black South Africans during apartheid, who were disenabled by the system, through the structural violence manifested in discriminatory legislation. In addition, the racist language directed towards the black people comprises a kind of violence that robs them of their humanity.

Concerning the first sphere of violence, the novel documents the violence witnessed by, perpetrated by, or directed towards the police. In "Concerning Violence," Fanon argues that in the colonial state, the police force is one of the tools used to maintain power, "by means of rifle butts and napalm" (38). Using "the language of pure force" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 38), the police and military forces ensure that the gap between the oppressed and the oppressors remains wide. This is the reality of the apartheid regime in South Africa, which "had built up for its support and survival a system of policing which was militaristic in its structure and training" (Joshi), with the police as one of its instruments of oppression (Sachs 223; Brogden and Shearing viii).<sup>18</sup> The tension that characterises the whole country is also felt within the police force, although Moleko ignores this atmosphere until the crucial moment. For a long time while he is in the service, he does not take seriously the stories of violence that he hears. This includes violence perpetrated against the civilian population as well as against black members of the police force. In retaliation, the population directs their anger towards the police force, looked upon as part of the enemy (Joshi). To most people, the police do not discriminate between the victim and the criminal: "when you call them they arrest you along with the thugs. They don't pick and choose" (33). This is a statement reflecting the perception by the majority of black people of police attitudes and behaviour towards the black population. It further hints at Moleko's unwitting acquiescence to violence by virtue of belonging to this brutal police system, a position which complicates his role as a victim in the narrative.

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<sup>18</sup> Recent events in South Africa suggest that the militaristic tendencies of the police force were not exclusive to the apartheid period. This is evidenced by what has been termed the Marikana Massacre in the South African press, which involved use of lethal force by police to stop striking workers at a mine on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2012. Thirty-four mine workers were shot and killed during the incident (Marinovich).

On the second level, there is the air of subtle, structural violence of racism exercised at his workplace, of which Moleko is ultimately a victim. Indeed, as Philip H. Frankel observes, during apartheid, racial discrimination was rife in the police force in areas of “training, promotion, and salaries” (487). As a result the figure that we have of Moleko is that of an individual who does not appear to fit in his chosen location. Because of his race, any authority and respect that he has at the workplace is, at best, only an illusion.<sup>19</sup> That, coupled with the unwillingness of his colleagues to assist him, compounds his feelings of alienation. As one colleague tells him bluntly: “You’re a difficult man to have as a friend, Tumelo [...]. one man can’t do it all alone and you must remember – you’re still only a black man” (99). This statement captures both the fact that blackness is associated with inferiority and that Tumelo is deemed a troublemaker at his workplace for not thinking of himself as inferior, confirming Veit-Wild’s earlier cited remark about the cheeky African. Worse still, in his neighbourhood, he risks being taken as a sell-out due to his working for the police.

In a way, Moleko’s workplace is a microcosmic representation of race relations in apartheid South Africa. One way this is evident is in the use of language – itself a disabling apparatus – in this space. The police station presents a typical example of language violence in apartheid South Africa, with some of the white officers publicly calling their black colleagues “kaffirs” (19) or “coons” (28) with “fuck-all between the ears” (23). This language is disabling in the sense that it is meant to affirm the inferiority of the Other. The term “kaffir”, for example, is used to denigrate black people in South Africa, a point the protagonist appears to be aware of when he says to his wife, “Everyone knows the Boers call people kaffirs. I know it’s what they yell when they’re panel beating someone, when they’re kicking someone on the ground” (109). Moleko’s statement, particularly the phrase “panel beating”, captures the unfortunate familiarity of police brutality in this context. Not only is such derogatory language meant to render the Other inferior, it also casts them as less than human. Interestingly, in a striking similarity to Sembène’s *Camp de Thiaroye*, the usage of racial slurs betrays the failure and/or reluctance of the white man to recognize the black man’s humanity.

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<sup>19</sup> This is especially so given the provision that “no Black policemen of any rank [could] give an order to a White policeman, however much lower in rank the latter may be [and] Black policemen [were] under instructions never to arrest White offenders, nor [were] Black policemen ever placed in charge of White prisoners” (Sachs 235). It is only in 1980 that a black policeman was given authority over white police, having been appointed as a station commander (Brogden and Shearing 77).

As a character, Tumelo John Moleko often comes across as unrealistically naïve. For instance, he believes for a long time that the word “kaffir” will never be directed towards him, because (he imagines) he is on equal footing with his white police colleagues. This is a word, he believes, that you don’t say “to someone who works with you in the force. We stick by each other in the force” (109). After all, as one character observes of Moleko, he is “supposed to be one of them [the police]” (112) and thus relatively safe. The illusion of this presumption is highlighted by the attitude of some of his white superiors, to whom he is simply “the presumptuous little sergeant who thought he was white” (167). Moleko’s naiveté is thus painful to witness, since the reader recognizes the racist atmosphere that Moleko conveniently ignores. For instance, he thinks it unremarkable that there are separate toilets for blacks and whites at his college, not recognizing the structural violence at the heart of the apartheid system. His ignorance of the truth in a way foregrounds the partial deafness that he is to suffer later in the narrative. His code of honour has no practical utility in the world of apartheid South Africa, and his values of mutual respect and truthfulness end up costing him dearly in this racist, violent context.

The most explicit form of violence occurs when Moleko is assaulted by Colonel Van Niekerk. This is the disabling moment in more senses than the inflicting of physical injury to the black man’s eardrum. Van Niekerk’s rage betrays a contempt not only for Moleko, but for his entire race of “kaffirs who are causing all this shit,” supposedly only good at “murdering and burning” (86). As the violent act that directly causes Moleko’s impairment, it is the most visible of the three levels. We can read in Van Niekerk’s violent act and utterances a desire to disenable the entire black race, to keep them ‘in their place,’ downtrodden: “For [Van Niekerk] the blacks actually shouldn’t be anywhere near where he is: they irritate him out of his mind. But since they are there, all around him, they must do what they are told, and if they don’t, then it’s his job to put them right” (89). Van Niekerk’s actions gesture towards a larger form of (apartheid) oppression whose project includes “*the material destruction of human bodies and populations*” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 12, italics in original). Colonial and apartheid forms of sovereignty were characterised by an assumption of “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 27, italics in original). Under apartheid, the black man’s body falls into the expendable category. From this moment onwards, Moleko’s deafened ear takes precedence as a focalising image in the text, bringing to mind the synecdochic deaf ears that Moleko’s complaints fall on. Born of a deliberate moment of violence, his impairment ironically

heralds Moleko's own realisation of the other forms of violence exercised against his race. The resulting dragging on of his case, and his eventual murder at the hands of colleagues, illustrate quite clearly the intertwining of disabling violence and race in this context.

If we shift our focus from Moleko's workplace to his home, the novel affords a new perspective for reading his impairment. It stresses the importance of family, which in this case, includes an uncle of Moleko's. This elderly relation firmly believes Moleko has been bewitched: that "[s]omeone's put a spell on [him]" (157) – hence the lack of improvement in his condition. For a long time, Moleko ignores his uncle's suggestions that he seek a traditional cure until his wife persuades him to reconsider.

In her book *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* Clare Barker reiterates her call for the acknowledgement of "local epistemologies" (190); cultural knowledge bases that have the potential to both disrupt and expand current theorising of disability. The examination of postcolonial writing is one way of opening up the current narrow perspective of disability studies. In *Deafening Silence*, the seemingly marginal character of Moleko's uncle could be read as the author's comment on local epistemologies of disability and illness. This character, though minor, is important in introducing another dimension of Moleko's story separate from the disciplinary hearings and the hospital visits that are central to the narrative. The uncle takes Moleko to see a traditional healer, "a proper doctor with horns" (157), where we are privy to a reading of disability which does not fall neatly into either the medical or the social model of disability. This is because, much as the traditional healer may be seen as a doctor, his 'diagnosis' is fully anchored in the socio-cultural domain. In Moleko's case, for instance, the *ngaka* pronounces: "'You've forgotten something. That's the problem. You must go back. Put it right first'" (158). Apparently, the prescription is from Moleko's ancestors, channelled through the healer. This immediately suggests that Moleko's bodily condition is not to be regarded as an individual matter, but rather as one which must be read against the background of his socio-cultural community. It signals the important point that in most African cultures, the causes of disability are traced to relationships with "cosmologies and social worlds" (Devlieger, "Why Disabled?" 104). This is just another illustration of how it takes this tragic turn of events for Moleko to start recognising his location within, and connection with, the black community. Although the uncle's intervention is dismissed by some of the characters in the text, it exemplifies what Barker calls a need for "cultural diversification" (*Postcolonial Fiction* 22) in disability studies. Texts such as *Deafening Silence* gesture towards such

alternative systems of knowledge, in the process destabilizing the assumed universality of Western models of disability.

On his way home from the *ngaka*, Moleko is convinced that the message has something to do with his having foregone circumcision: “I haven’t been properly initiated as a man of Africa. That’s what I must put right” (159). This scene pays heed to a cultural epistemology of disability, where the supernatural world is seen as affecting the material world, to the extent of causing illnesses and disabilities. This is a system of knowledge that is frowned upon by many in the modern world, but Moleko finds himself subscribing to it simply because he has nowhere else to go. The uncle’s attempted intervention in Moleko’s case reveals Miles’s text’s potential to “[draw] attention to the ‘situatedness of knowledge’ about disabled difference” (Barker, "Interdisciplinary Dialogues" 22). Moleko goes through the circumcision, firm in his belief that he is becoming a “true black” (165). The traditional healer’s diagnosis illustrates a system of beliefs that informs the way people understand bodily affliction. At one point, Moleko’s uncle opines that the reason his ear does not get any better is because “[t]he person who put a spell on him must be dead” (235). Later on he produces a medicine horn and tells Moleko: “we must put your enemy’s footprints in splints, so he can’t follow you” (236). It is easy to dismiss the older man’s utterances as superstition, yet they provide the reader with a glimpse into another social reality. This is the reality that Moleko becomes aware of, a world characterised by connections – even on the metaphysical plane – between individuals; connections strong enough to cause bodily impairment.

The hearing impairment itself acquires symbolic meaning, created by the various forms of violence that Moleko encounters. For instance, as seen in the novel, Moleko’s impairment develops from his assault at the hands of Van Niekerk, which is itself a result of strong racist hatred. His deaf ear is therefore a reminder of both the dis(en)abling violence of apartheid and the racism characterising relations among colleagues in the police force. In spite of his naïveté, however, there is still some saving grace to Moleko’s character, features which hint at the enabling potential of such a narrative, such as his persistence in seeking justice. As observed earlier, the onset of the impairment enables Moleko’s recognition and acknowledgement of the prejudices suffered by black people. He is nevertheless convinced, perhaps naively, that the system shall pass fair judgement in his case. In a way, Moleko’s case mirrors Pays’s (in *Camp de Thiaroye*). Both characters are injured in the line of duty for states which nonetheless consider them second-class citizens. In addition, for both men, traumatic and disabling experiences appear to be requisite for the recognition of racial

injustice. It is only upon experiencing violence that the state's prejudices are unmasked to the characters. In Moleko's case, his persistence reveals a character with a strong conviction of rightness of his claims, a character willing to stand up to a system that transforms children like his own into "[c]hildren of violence" (221). Read in this way, Moleko emerges as a figure whose otherwise admirable virtues render him ill equipped in this particular world.

Tumelo John Moleko's death closely parallels the deaths of the soldiers who died in Dakar in 1944. In the first place, neither narrative was fully accessible to the public until long after it occurred. Furthermore, both stories end in racially motivated violence, at the centres of which are characters whose disabilities are central to the plot. And in both cases one is left with the impression that much as the story has finally reached the public, there is still no justice for the violence enacted against the protagonist(s).<sup>20</sup> Despite this, the sense of the tragedy and injustice is balanced with recognition of the protagonist's courage and sense of personal dignity. The reader is heartened by the observation that even in the direst of disabling circumstances, there are still characters willing to rise up and insist on having their humanity recognised. Even so, perhaps the most enduring form of enablement emerges from the act of representation. As Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi observes, in contrast "to the real violence used in autocratic and manipulative systems, violence in writing can provide 'a space for freedom in which the writer can insert political and esthetic demands'" (Mudimbe-Boyi, cited in Kalisa, 133). Ousmane Sembène's and John Miles's narratives are commendable in this respect, as their portrayals of violence are key aesthetic re-enactments of important moments of history.

### **Torture, trauma and pain: *Beneath the Lion's Gaze***

Maaza Mengiste attempts a similar re-imagining of history in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. The novel is her creative attempt to present a particular chapter in Ethiopia's history, seen through the eyes of the members of a single family. The main events of the novel occur during the final days of Emperor Haile Selassie's reign in that country, and the novel moves on to depict the brutality in rulership and social control that followed the deposition of the Emperor. This period spans roughly four years, from 1974 to 1978. After the Emperor's death, the country

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<sup>20</sup> In *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog notes that in their testimony, the policemen presented varying versions of the murder, with all of them reluctant to claim responsibility for the death of Irene Motasi (82-89). All those who testified before the TRC were granted amnesty for the murder of Richard Motasi, but not for the killing of Irene Motasi. Some of the policemen involved refused to appear before the Commission. The granting of amnesty for the death of Richard Motasi makes this one of many cases in which the victim's family feels justice was not achieved.

was ruled by a particularly harsh military regime which came to be known as the Derg.<sup>21</sup> In the novel, Mengiste focuses on one family and their close friends' personal experiences of the violence in Addis Ababa at this time.

The inclusion of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* in this chapter is something unique, since, unlike the other narratives discussed, it is the only one featuring a setting that was not under any form of colonisation. As a result, there are no racist overtones informing the violence featured within. Nevertheless, the politically motivated violence in this setting resembles that in formerly colonised nations. This is the case especially in the way both military regimes – that of Haile Selassie and that of the Derg – mobilise violence as a means of control, engaged in a dirty war that keeps the citizens subjugated. It is this violence that is both disabling to the people as well as being a cause of disablement to individuals.

Mengiste's novel features individuals who witness or suffer disablement and violence, but who nevertheless retain a certain vitality that is the most enduring part of their character. Bodies in pain – of which there are a disturbing abundance in the text – form a crucial part of this analysis. This inclusion is done with full awareness that pain can be a complex issue that risks detracting focus from social constructions of disability (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 202). However, analysing scenes of pain provides an entry point to various forms of violence depicted in the text. The scenes of physical violence evident in the novel accompany a more subtle sort of disablement at work in Addis Ababa. This is in an atmosphere saturated with the threat of violence. David Riches, as paraphrased by Jon Abbink, writes of a similar kind of violence. He states:

Violence is seen as a contested activity to forcefully intimidate, dominate, and inflict disabling physical harm on others, with possible fatal results. The definition should also cover 'psychological violence', the state of terror in the minds of people which can be the result of the constant *threat* of violence. (Abbink 129, italics in original)

This constant threat of violence is an important tool used by rulers in Ethiopia. *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* presents a setting where the populace slowly adjust their lives to accommodate occurrences of violence. According to Abbink, this is a clear illustration of a “culture of violence”, which emerges when the performance “of violence becomes a fact of life to which people... orient their daily behaviour” (129). Achille Mbembe observes a similar phenomenon, which he terms the “spirit of violence”. This phenomenon manifests when

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<sup>21</sup> For more details on the Ethiopian Revolution and the brutalities exercised by the Derg, see Marcus (1994), Abbink (1995), Zewde (2002), Tareke (2009) and Zewde (2009).

violence “insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language [and] consciousness” (*Postcolony* 175). Although not a postcolonial state, this “omnipresence” of violence characterises Ethiopia during the reign of the Derg, as a manifestation of that mythical/stereotypical Africa where “[w]ar is seen as all-pervasive” (Mbembe, *Postcolony* 8).

There is much to be read from the evidence of violence that Mengiste presents to the reader. These include bodies that have been beaten, shot, burned and broken. The reader empathises with these bodies in pain. However, the realisation slowly dawns that although these bodies are broken, their spirit remains strong. These damaged and deformed bodies house some of the text’s most enduring characters. This ultimately casts doubt on the absolute success of violence as a means of permanently disabling the people in this novel. The opening of the novel highlights this idea of resilience in the face of violence. Hailu, one of the protagonists, is a surgeon of some renown in Addis Ababa, and in this scene, he is about to operate on the unconscious body of a young male student protester:

A thin blue vein pulsed in the collecting pool of blood where a bullet had lodged deep in the boy’s back. Hailu was sweating under the heat from the bright operating room lights. There was pressure behind his eyes. He leaned his head to one side and a nurse’s ready hand wiped sweat from his brow. He looked back at his scalp, the shimmering blood and torn tissues, and tried to imagine the fervor that had led this boy to believe he was stronger than Emperor Haile Selassie’s highly trained police. (5)

The boy has been shot, and the bullet is lodged in his spine. As we learn later, this results in the boy’s disablement. A minor, nameless character in the novel, this boy is nonetheless important. He creates a particularly bloody beginning to the novel, setting the tone for a number of other disabling moments and deaths that occur. In a detailed description of what he sees before him, Hailu conveys his shock and failure to understand what to him is the recklessness of the youth of his time: “The hole in the boy’s back was a punctured, burned blast of muscle and flesh. The run towards the bullet had been more graceful than his frightened sprint away” (6). Hailu deduces from the wound that the boy had been injured while fleeing from the armed police. However, what he does not immediately realise is the courage and determination that motivates these students, in the face of lethal bullets. The narrative is harrowing in its description of mutilated bodies or the processes of inflicting that damage. Almost all of those bodies receive such injuries at the hands of pitiless military personnel. Christine Matzke identifies this particular boy as “represent[ing] the many ‘bodies’ that in this novel are at stake” (94). Many are indeed disfigured and killed, but the

youth (including this young boy) represents the hope that many in Ethiopia find in the students.

This analysis draws on two groups of characters: victims of physical violence and some physically disabled characters presented later in the novel. Those who experience physical violence – in the form of torture – include Hailu himself; a young girl whose identity remains a mystery for the greater part of the novel; and Berhane, a seven-year old boy. All these characters illustrate the links between disablement and violence, but also serve as testaments to the resilience of the human will.

Hailu is important to this discussion not only as a victim of torture, but also as a focaliser for some of the most shocking scenes in the text. The reader is presented with a gaze upon the mutilated body through the eyes of a surgeon. This is beneficial for two reasons: seen through Hailu's professional eye, the bodies are presented in minute specifics, delineating marks of violence and presenting to the reader approximations of pain that the victim is feeling. Secondly, this perspective creates proximity between reader and character. Having access to Hailu's thoughts, the reader is drawn closer to him and shares his emotions. His compassion could be in large part due to the nature of the disablement that he recognizes (which results from state violence) and the harsh disregard for the body that he reads in both the soldiers' and the students' actions. As witnesses to Hailu's thoughts, readers realise that his is not the mechanical objectification evident in the medical practitioners in Musa E. Zulu's and William N. Zulu's narratives, but rather a touchingly conscious attempt to empathize with his patients, in order to try and trace the origin of their courage to face the armed police.

The novel emphasises the effect that the sight of victims of physical violence has on other characters. Of interest therefore are not just the victims of violence, but also those who witness such violence or suffering. Emotions of compassion, love and empathy link most of these characters. Martha Nussbaum argues that some of the emotions that we feel “expand the boundaries of the self, picturing the self as constituted in part by strong attachments to independent things and persons” (300). The emotion of compassion, for example, is “occasioned by the awareness of another person's misfortune” (Nussbaum 301). Further, and perhaps more relevantly, compassion “suggests a [great] deal of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion” (Nussbaum 302). Hailu is one character on whom the sight of broken bodies has a jolting effect. He cannot resist feeling sympathy for those on his operating table. Part of his emotion comes from the fact

that such bodies make him realise the limits of his own abilities as a surgeon. They emphasize his helplessness in a world that pays little respect to the human body.

Hailu's compassion towards the patients harmed by the police and the soldiers is driven largely by his horrifying realisation that his son could end up the same way. As he looks down on the mangled body,

Hailu imagined him keeping pace with the throngs of other high school and college students, hands raised, voice loud. [...] A boy living his moment of manhood too early. How many shots had to be fired to turn this child back towards his home and anxious mother? (6)

The boy on the operating table is approximately the same age as Hailu's son, Dawit. Ironically, later in the novel, it is not Dawit who undergoes torture, but Hailu. The disabled body is a very loud reminder of human mortality (Couser, *Recovering* 295). In this ableist world, it is a disconcerting signifier that reminds humans they do not inhabit the indestructible, normate bodies they wish for. In his operating room, Hailu is all too often made aware of the fragility of the human body. Compassion, such as Hailu feels at this moment, brings about "the recognition of one's own vulnerability" (Nussbaum 319). As he looks upon the prone body of the young man, he feels sadness at the thought that "none of these children seemed to believe in the frailty of their muscles and bones" (6). The bleeding and burned body before him is an all too real reminder of that reality. And his fear is of Dawit ending up like this patient, who, we are informed, is "permanently crippled" as a result of the bullet in his spine (7). The interesting thing here is that Hailu blames the young people protesting in the streets. This early in the narrative, Hailu does not focus on the agents of violence, the soldiers of the Selassie regime, similar to Tumelo John Moleko's behaviour in *Deafening Silence*, in choosing to turn away from the obvious perpetration of violence around him until it affects him directly.

At some point later in the novel, locked in a cell, Hailu observes, "the body knows itself" (199). This statement is made in a moment of desperation, in his fear that he is losing his sense of time. However, it is an utterance that is applicable to all the bodies in pain featured in the novel, suggesting the elusive nature of meanings associated with them. Mengiste does not present the bodies in pain as being merely passive. Instead, even as they lie broken, they are accorded a form of resistance hardly evident in those unharmed. This is seen, for instance, in the bodies' capacity for endurance. Through torture and killing, both the military personnel and the medical personnel (through surgery and medicalization) attempt to assume control. In

spite of their efforts, we are left with a realisation that all these actions are futile attempts at controlling the person's attitude, actions and mind through inflicting suffering on the body. This 'unknowability' of the body, its "wondrous and cursed gift for withstanding abuse" (135) in spite of being subjected to various degrees of pain, undermines the disablement associated with violence.

Torture is one of the main channels through which violence is inflicted on various characters in the novel. The reader is first introduced to the phenomenon in the novel when soldiers loyal to the new political dispensation (after the toppling of Selassie's government) bring to Hailu's surgical ward a severely tortured, deeply unconscious young girl. In a scene reminiscent of the one at the opening of the novel, the sight of the young girl's body sparks a wave of questions in Hailu's angry and horrified mind:

But what could have prepared him for a girl wrapped in a clear plastic sheet? What medical book could have taught him that a sheet of plastic as big as a body could dig into wounds like this? That wounds this deep and vicious could be on a young girl? [...] Clumps of hair had been pulled out of her head. Blood had soaked through her trousers and bright, flowered blouse. Her swollen feet hung off one end of the gurney. All this was covered and displayed in plastic like a butcher's oversized trophy. Seeping out of the opening of the plastic bag was the smell of excrement and burnt flesh... (119)

This graphic scene reveals the surgeon's shock; his disbelief that humans could be the agents of such injuries, and his realisation that even his medical training and experience have not prepared him for such "proof of one man's sustained cruelty" (135). The damaged, gruesomely harmed condition of this body is similar to, though worse than, that of the boy at the beginning, right from the age of the patient to the agents of their disfigurement. Bodily disfigurement of detainees during the reign of the Derg was never a secret. Students were among the thousands killed and tortured during the reign of this oppressive regime. In fact, making the mutilated bodies a public spectacle was one strategy of ensuring compliance and fear among the populace.<sup>22</sup> A body like the one brought before Hailu, therefore, indicates disablement on several levels. Besides the physical injury to the body, there is also the spectacle of pain that it represents. This is a form of violence on its own, a spectacularisation of bodily violation as "an elaborate theatrics of violence," deliberately "staged and performed" (Abbink 137). Besides causing pain to a particular individual, the remaining

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<sup>22</sup> At the height of the Red Terror, relations of protesting youths who had been shot were required to pay some money for the bullets in the youths' bodies if they wanted to claim them and give them a proper burial (Zewde, "History" 28; Abbink 137). Otherwise, the bodies were left on the roads to rot and be eaten by hyenas (see *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, pages 239-242).

scarification serves as a warning to others. It is meant to display the extent to which the Derg is willing to go to maintain its hold on power. In fact, as the brutality depicted in the novel gets worse, dead bodies are a common sight in the streets, and people are prohibited from removing and burying these bodies. The threat of disabling harm is here almost as bad as the actual harm. The overall effect of such explicit violence is to arrest activity among the citizens and breed mistrust among them. It is in this sense that the mutilated bodies become indicators of both disablement and disenabling.

With Hailu as the focaliser, we understand how this young girl's body serves to highlight not just the violence of the dirty war, but other attendant forms of disablement that are to follow because of the state of her body. In this conservative society, the scarred, raped, deformed woman becomes a figure of shame, a *misfit*, to employ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's application of the word. J. Abbink observes that during the Red Terror, those with power ignored "the complex values of honour and shame around sexuality" and thus "[indulged] in [...] practices of rape and torture to an extent unknown before" (138). The aforementioned values endured amongst the downtrodden. The rape victim in this society is therefore considered contaminated, in spite of the forced circumstances of the ordeal. Such a body attracts social stigma. For instance, this young girl, "who had been raped, violently, [would] be so ashamed she'd never marry" (154). In addition to the social discrimination, she would be plagued by nightmares would be likely to occur as echoes of her experience of torture. Mengiste here suggests that torture is not a momentary instance of violence. The actual physical violence may end, but the violence endures through vivid images in the victim's mind.

Hailu is aware of all this, and therefore slips a cyanide pill into the girl's mouth when she approaches (physical) recovery. His empathetic thoughts on her bleak future engage the reader in an attempt to justify what to him is a merciful act. Regardless, he is summoned to "jail", where he moves from being a witness of the violent disabling used to cow the populace, to physically experiencing such disablement. This moment opens up another stage of bodily disablement in the novel: the phenomenon of torture. It is only hinted at with the spectacle of the young girl, but from this moment, Mengiste delves into the uncomfortable terrain of state-sanctioned torture. Her depiction of this brutality is all the more powerful since Hailu remains the focaliser through whom the reader perceives all. The association of the "jail" with death also marks it as a tool of disenabling in Addis Ababa. The mere mention of this place evokes fear in people, since few ever return from it.

Interpreting the experience of torture from the perspective of the tortured is no simple exercise. This is because, as Elaine Scarry stresses, pain is incommunicable. It is an experience that is antithetical to language itself (4). It follows that any attempt to analyse it must of necessity be engaged in from the perspective of the observer, which falls short of describing the sensations felt by the victim. Much as this might be the case, the imaginative representation of torture, as done by Mengiste, offers a perspective that skirts the issue of the incommunicability of the experience. Though neither victim nor mere observer, the writer occupies both perspectives. Scarry points out that this is indeed possible, for literary artists are examples of individuals who can “speak *on behalf of* those who are [in pain]” (6, italics in original). Mengiste’s rendering of Hailu’s torture illustrates this point, enabling the “passage of pain into speech” (Scarry 9).

One of the main agents of torture presented in the novel is “The Colonel”, a terrifying figure whose history is shrouded in mystery. Rumour abounds “of his ruthlessness with prisoners of war, of his terrifying methodical means of torture and murder” (248). The disabling nature of torture is complex in the sense that while it may cause actual physical pain, it also affects the victim’s sense of reality:

In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, [torture] bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body. It then goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the visions of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power. (Scarry 27)

To negate the victim’s sense of reality is to actually make him question his very existence. Paradoxically, the pain is constantly there to remind the victim of his reality, though it may be confined to the walls of the torture room. This diminishing of reality is yet another level of violent disablement, since it destabilises all that anchors the individual in reality. It is precisely what Hailu experiences through both the assaults and the misinformation he is given. Astonishingly, the detailed description of the sensations of pain is part of what helps Hailu to maintain a hold on the present. The same detail presented in his examination of his patients is evident here in his experiences of torture. Even through his pain, for instance, he marvels at the methodical precision of blows struck against his face (204-205). Mengiste attempts here to create an insider’s view to torture, where the breaking down of the body is presented to the reader in detail.

The Colonel's method indeed affirms Scarry's suggestion that torture confers an imaginary sense of power on the torturer. In the process of inflicting inexpressible pain on Hailu, the Colonel is careful to avoid staining himself or his uniform, remaining "immaculately clean" (250) throughout the process. This is particularly striking given that after a few rounds of torture, Hailu is bleeding and has even emptied his bowels. Regarding Hailu's body as a site of contamination, it is easy for the Colonel to treat Hailu merely as a source of information, not a human being worthy of respect. Yet, as Scarry puts it "[t]o have pain is to have *certainty*" (13, italics in original). Nowhere is this certainty better expressed than in Hailu's descriptions of the breaking down of his body.

For the tortured, the "[i]ntense pain is world-destroying" (Scarry 29). For the torturer, on the other hand, the same process "[objectifies] [...] the sense that he has a world [...] a world whose asserted magnitude is confirmed by the cruelty it is able to motivate and justify" (Scarry 36). In *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, the torturer's authority is created in this fashion, only to be overturned. This happens from the moment the reader realises that the young girl who had been tortured was the Colonel's daughter. The Colonel finally realises, to his shock, that his daughter had been tortured at the hands of "Girma the Butcher", a man the Colonel himself acknowledges as a "monster" (252) due to his inhuman torture methods. Killing her, he realises, was an act of mercy on Hailu's part. The shock of this knowledge drives him to suicide soon afterwards. On the other hand, Hailu is released. So in this case – burned, battered and bruised – the tortured outlives the torturer. Although he is not entirely in a stable frame of mind, Hailu's return home and his reunion with his family end the narrative on a slightly positive note. Reduced through torture to "nothing but a mass of damaged nerves and soft bones" (270), Hailu's broken body endures nonetheless. In this way, this body – indeed the whole family – can be read as representing the resistance of the Ethiopian people to the oppressive regime of the Derg.

Hailu is released, but the other victims of torture in the novel are not as fortunate – if one may call it that. The young girl's torture is shocking in its brutality, and Hailu's experience is horrifying in the level of proximity to the reader. But the case of the third victim, Berhane, is especially harrowing due to the age and innocence of the victim. The seven-year old is captured, tortured and killed at the hands of the Derg. His fate is particularly tragic because prior to his capture, he is presented as an innocent and heart-warmingly naïve little boy who is eager to do his part for his poor family by selling newspapers. Therefore, when he becomes

an unwitting pawn in the brutal politics of the country, the reader sympathises deeply with his fate.

When he is captured, one of the officers attempts to elicit information from this little boy by piercing parts of his body with needles, while the boy is restrained to a chair. The physical brutality of the act (of torture) is appalling, a response intensified by the ruthlessness of the torturer inflicting this agony on a little boy. Our insider's knowledge of Berhane's innocence, in terms of the grotesquely invalid accusations and the boy's age and inexperience make this torture the supreme proof of the insanity of Derg rule as depicted by Mengiste. Berhane's later death is almost equally harrowing when he is shot while marching amongst other prisoners in the town – forced to chant Marxist slogans, praising the very people who have imposed a reign of terror. He is shot down in the street simply because he cannot keep up with the rest of the prisoners, themselves mowed down upon arrival at their 'destination'.

Torture enables the exploration of one level of disablement in the novel. However, it would be doing this novel an injustice to ignore a small group of disabled characters presented midway through the narrative. These are beggars located at St Gabriel's Church. To understand the significance of these characters to this discussion, it is important to recognise the significance of this site – the church – to one key character in the novel, Sara.

Sara seems to be a minor character until the moment her daughter, Tizita, suffers a rare abdominal complication – intussusception – where her intestines knot over themselves. When the hospital is unable to help, Sarah turns to God, and her way of doing this is to pray for seven days while crawling on her bare knees around St. Gabriel's Church, upon ground which she has purposely littered with shards of broken glass. At the church, Sara receives assistance from characters whose bodies are deemed 'different' by society's standards, occupying the category of misfits in this society. One of them is “an old beggar crouched on one row of steps surrounding the eight-sided church, his blind gray eyes roving in their sockets like hungry rats” (94). This beggar, emitting a “stench of rotting skin” (94), is used by Mengiste to evoke an atmosphere of uncleanness or contamination that is associated with bodily difference. It is in this class of body that we find all the broken bodies in the narrative, bodies deemed undesirable and disruptive to the ableist order. Such bodies are to be evicted from ableist spaces, sometimes even through violence (comparable to the banishment of the beggars in Sembène's *Xala*, discussed in the next chapter). Accompanying the old beggar is “a little girl...on scarred knees that extended to a pair of shrivelled legs trailing limply behind

her” (94). Shockingly illustrating the fact that such bodies are part of this image of social contamination, some decently dressed women kick her away as she approaches them to beg for assistance. We might read in the women’s action a parallel with the whole state of Ethiopia at this time, in which spectacular exercising of control over which bodies are to be seen in public is prevalent. It involves removing those not deemed “bodies that matter”, to quote Judith Butler, while the display of dead bodies – the state’s victims – is a newly instituted, shocking tactic of terrorism. The scene at the church is also a passing reference to the connection between disability and poverty, made clear in the starkly different class positions of the disabled and the non-disabled. It highlights the way that poverty further disenables those with anomalous bodies.

Sara’s self-inflicted violence in this space gains her entry into this space of othered bodies. Serious pain is capable of robbing us of our language faculty, causing “a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans” (Scarry 6). For Sara, the opposite happens: the more her knees bleed, and the more her pain “[dulls] into a thick ache” (95), the stronger her praying voice becomes. The ordeal strengthens her faith, and this is what she needs to maintain belief that her daughter will recover. Although there are clear religious motives for what she does, her actions (temporarily) dis(en)able her, reducing her after a few days to an “immobile, [...] shivering body in the dirt” (95). In this deliberate self-disablement, Sara is brought closer to the othered in her society, such as the “doe-eyed hunchback with no front teeth” (96) who offers her assistance in the form of pads made out of eucalyptus leaves, which she is to apply to her bloodied knees. This is a gesture that yields significant meaning for our reading of the disabled body and the space in which it is located in the text. Like Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala*, Mengiste here seems to endow the outcasts – or misfits – with knowledge of healing in their society.<sup>23</sup> The image we are given of this nameless helper is worth dwelling on: her actions are those of kindness, but at the same time her disfigured back and her missing teeth are considered “stareable traits” (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 95) in this ableist society. Further, Mengiste’s inclusion of these characters could be read as a minor commentary on morality. With this disabled woman’s kindness and empathy, this scene destabilizes any notion of bodily disfigurement having moral implications. In fact, Mengiste strongly challenges any association of the disabled body with malevolence by portraying the able-bodied in this scene (the well-dressed women) as heartless. Their action betrays the ableist fear of contamination by the disabled character. In this scene, however, it is the disabled characters that show

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<sup>23</sup> I discuss the role of outcasts in *Xala* in the next chapter.

kindness to Sara. Through the actions of these characters, the suggestion is strongly made that these are the characters with the strength to survive the oppressive regime.

This description of uncleanness at a place associated with holiness is deliberately made by Mengiste. Juxtaposing the picture of filth embodied in the beggars and the old hunchbacked woman with that of the church drives home a particularly significant point. As regular features at the church, the disabled persons exercise a unique form of ownership of that space. It is therefore a gesture rich with meaning that Sara should travel a long way (from relative affluence) in order to seek healing for her child, spurning the modern hospital space which has already proven ineffective. In joining and receiving assistance from these disabled figures, Sara exemplifies Mengiste's overturning of notions of normalcy as superior, which demand that Sara – as an able-bodied individual who occupies a middle-class position in society – should stick with her own. Through entering this space, and enduring the ensuing, voluntary mutilation of her body, Sara illustrates the realisation of being a misfit in her particular society, and shows a fierce wish to fit into this one, even if temporarily.

As illustrated, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* nearly overwhelms the reader with graphic scenes of violence and mutilated bodies. These violent scenes draw attention to the profound sense of disablement that afflicts the citizens of Addis Ababa during the 'Red Terror' of the Derg, and the earlier, neglectful rule of the Emperor. This disablement, this sense of helplessness, is challenged by various characters in the text. Besides the tortured bodies discussed here, there are bodies affected by disabling ailments such as Selam's and Tizita's. It is the tortured bodies, however, that permit the closest look at the process of disabling another's body. Mengiste's description of these bodies at once draws the reader's empathy and imbues them with a form of resistance to the oppression by the state. The abundance of tortured bodies within this space graphically – and indelibly – establishes the injustice and ruthlessness prevalent at this time. Among the most harrowing images in Mengiste's novel are those of suffering children. Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* engages more closely with the role of war violence in the disabling of people, among whom are children as both victims and agents of violence.

### **Living scars of innocence: *Moses, Citizen & Me***

Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel has links with the body of narratives of child soldiers in third world countries, despite the author's resistance to that tag (of the novel as a child soldier narrative) (Gagiano). The title of the novel gestures towards three central characters, all of

them troubled souls in their different ways. The narrator, Julia, is a second-generation Sierra Leonean who has been living in England for most of her forty years. She is invited back to her mother country to help support her uncle, Moses, whose wife was killed. The shocking fact is that Moses' wife, Adele, died at the hands of her grandson, the boy nicknamed Citizen. The novel is an exploration of the narrator's attempts to heal the emotional wounds of both Moses and his grandson, while at the same time dealing with her own sense of displacement – what Ato Quayson calls “ex-centricity” (*Calibrations* 76) – as a Sierra Leonean who regards England as her home. This is done through a curious form of magical realism, depicted through the narrator's vividly presented imaginings of Citizen's war experiences as well as therapeutic healing at a “faery clearing” (86) in the Gola forest.

*Moses, Citizen & Me* lends itself very well to an exploration of both disablement and violence. However, the novel depicts these realities in a rather unexpected fashion. In a novel that tackles post-war Sierra Leone, one would expect the novelist to dwell on the various images of amputees that “became symbolic of the atrocities and trauma of the war in both global and local discourses and media imagery” (Berghs 78).<sup>24</sup> However, save for a single line in the narrative, Jarrett-Macauley's novel “breaks through the merely sensationalist images of blood-letting and severing of limbs” (Gagiano), opting instead to focus on the ex-child soldiers. In spite of that, the dream-like atmosphere in the novel does not make the evidence of violence within it any less shocking. After all, at the centre of the story are children who have been through and participated in extremely harrowing violence – experiences which have affected their minds as well as their bodies. The link between violence and disablement in this novel is examined in two movements. First, I intend to illustrate how the author employs the damaged landscape of Sierra Leone to highlight destruction done to the land as well as its people. Secondly, the author also employs the characters of the ex-child soldiers – Citizen in particular – to mirror the profound disablement inflicted upon some of the most vulnerable of the country's people. The optimism that Jarrett-Macauley maintains in the depiction of her characters assists in anchoring the argument that

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<sup>24</sup> The Sierra Leone civil war is well documented in a number of texts, including Ishmael Beah's memoir of his time as a child soldier, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007). For more objective accounts of the war and the role of child soldiers, see Paul Richards's *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (1996); Ibrahim Abdullah's collection of essays, *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War* (2004); David Keen's *Conflict & Collusion in Sierra Leone* (2005); and Lansana Gberie's *A Dirty War in West Africa: The R.U.F. and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (2005).

victims of violence and dis(en)ablement retain some resilience despite the horrors that they have faced.<sup>25</sup>

The landscape in *Moses, Citizen & Me* is as central to the themes of the novel as its characters. This is attributable mainly to the narrator's affective descriptions of the land, which still bears scars of the war. Her language betrays certain nostalgia for her homeland, and highlights the fact that all is not well with the land. This emotive language can be detected, for example, in the opening section, where we find the ominous image of "Vultures" circling in the skies, mingling with "other gods" (1). This is an eerie and ominous image, especially since the association of the carrion bird with divinity highlights how commonplace death has become in the country.

Thus the description of the land suggests a climate of violence. Jarrett-Macauley also uses colours in her descriptions to indicate the prevailing mood of her setting. In this opening section, for example, the dreariness of post-war Sierra Leone is evoked in the description of the sky:

Darkness, when it descended, kissed away the orange-purple light of the villages and the silver sheen of the seashore. Now it was darkness for true. This was the end of an era for the people of the city, now passing each other with bowed heads and despairing glances along the roads. (1)

This is a stark situation, leaving very little room for optimism. It is in images such as these that the reader detects what may be called the social maiming of the land, a form of social disenabling brought about by the prevalence of violence. Although it is a place where one could say the worst is over with the passing of the war, with the country "emerging from the worst of its troubles" (5), the legacy of this dreadful time is still evident in the air of mistrust that lingers among the people – a mistrust born of the war. As a result, this disenabling is evident in "[f]amilies [that] did not know themselves, who was a friend, who was not?" (1-2). The war causes extremes of human behaviour, with "chapels looted, icons destroyed, imam[s] burnt alive" (2) in callous or frenzied displays of violence.

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<sup>25</sup> We cannot simply describe child soldiers as either absolutely innocent or guilty of violent atrocities. Instead, we could refer to them as 'victim-perpetrators': forced by violence to commit and inflict it on others and dis(en)abled by that. For some recent research on the representation of child soldiers in literature, see Edgar Nabutanyi's "Representations of Troubled Childhoods in Selected Post-1990 African Fiction in English" (2013) and Allison E. Mackey's "Apparitions of Planetary Consciousness in Contemporary Coming-of-Age Narratives: Reimagining Knowledge, Responsibility and Belonging" (2011).

Recognizing the disabling effects of war violence on the populace provides a stable perspective from which one can understand the condition of some of the key characters. Remarkably, the novel highlights violence only through its consequences on the land and its people. Jarrett-Macauley confronts the reader with images of disfiguration and scarification on the land as well as its people. The land is dotted with “weeping buildings” (6), “burnt villages,” “bombed bridges” (40) – marks of the destruction that the population has to cope with. It is in these scenes that the social maiming, the disablement, is to be seen. Metaphorically, the land appears as one large broken and bleeding body, a general picture in which individual characters – just as broken as the land itself – stand out. One of Julia’s first sights when she returns to the country is “a line of handsome young men bisected by a line of others whose limbs had been chopped off” (6). This image is an explicit piece of evidence of the disabling legacy of the war.<sup>26</sup> It brings to mind what Achille Mbembe calls *necropolitics*, or the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (“Necropolitics” 39). Both Jarrett-Macauley and Mengiste (in *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*) illustrate the ways in which the threat of death is used in by various “war machines” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 32) to keep civilians cowed. In these contexts, power is assumed through the targeting of civilian populations. The effects of this violence are what Julia sees before her. In the description of both the destroyed buildings and the disabled men, the narrator is jolted into a reality that is more insistent than the images she saw on television. The contrast in her description – disabled men standing next to “handsome men” – makes the image all the more powerful. The two ‘kinds’ of men appear to be irreconcilable realities, betraying an aesthetic valuing of one over the other. Nevertheless, the image of these “men, women and children on sticks, waiting for limbs” (18) remains on her mind, robbing her of sleep afterwards. This brief passage is etched on the mind of the reader as they try to construct an image of the narrator’s environment. This picture of the disabled war victims becomes even more poignant when the matter of child soldiers is introduced in the text. The reader realises at this moment that some of these people would have been mutilated at the hands of the child soldiers, leading to the latter’s demonization in the eyes of populace. With this realisation, the idea of violence as a disabling context gains more significance. The disablement wrought by war violence thus is not only in the visibly

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<sup>26</sup> During the Sierra Leone war, one of the most common brutalities perpetrated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was the amputation of civilians’ limbs. Numerous accounts from victims of these amputations detail how the rebels would ask them whether they preferred ‘long sleeves’ or ‘short sleeves’ as a way of forcing them to choose amputation of the hand or the arm above the elbow. The RUF rebels apparently “would refuse to kill them even when they (the victims) begged them to do so, with the rebels asserting that they were only interested in ‘chopping off’ their hands” (Gberie 14). Significantly, among the purported reasons for this violence was “to prevent people from voting” (Gberie 137).

amputated limbs – there is a deeper sense in which the war has infected and damaged the land and its people, and it is this broader sense of disablement that Jarrett-Macauley strives to depict – and challenge – through her characters.

This second type of disablement is displayed through attitudes of fear and mistrust, by people “passing each other with bowed heads and despairing glances along the road” (1). Julia is shocked by such behaviour of avoidance because it is contrary to the norm – in most African societies – of strangers exchanging greetings upon meeting or passing by each other. There is a palpable feeling among most people that the violence of the war can easily return, as Julia realises when she is instructed to “make no sudden moves at checkpoints, kee[p] heads down” (6). In her ex-centric position, she previously only witnessed the civil war in Sierra Leone from the safety of England, through “images in the newspapers and on television” (5). The ex-centric position (evident here in both the narrator and the author) permits a perspective on history that is protected from “sanctioned storytellings of the nation” (Quayson, *Calibrations* 192). In a way, that explains the emotion in the narrator’s description of the land and its people – it is partially fuelled by the desire for re-attachment to the country and shock at finding the very fabric of society has altered. Still, returning home, she realises that Sierra Leone is “imprinted on her life, war or not” (5).

Her words at times present the country as a fairy tale paradise warped by the war. Guns and bullets have turned the country from a place of love to one of hate. As a child, her first impression of the country had been in contrast to the mistrust that pervades the populace now. The present space is different from her childhood memory of “black faces [shining] back at mine, [smiling] and [looking] with joy at me” (17). One poetic description in the novel captures Julia’s thoughts, and vividly illustrates the tragic change of fortunes in the country:

*Sierra Leone is the land of gold and diamonds [...] a land of mountains and rivers that hold diamonds, colour and the sun in their memory, the home of descendants of the struggle, free and freed, settlers and migrants: a new Jerusalem. Palm-wine merchants, craftsmen and doctors, market women and bankers, Temne, Mende, Creole people, all lived side by side. Once the palm trees saw them all, bowed down to all. But now under the bullet spattered rubbish lying on the roads are the trinkets and plates, rugs and dolls of these belittled ancestors. Where is their gold now? Breeding hate like maggots. Where are their diamonds now? Some are alive; some are out partying. They are underground like hundreds of water rats with long tails and anxious eyes. (16, italics in original)*

There are powerful contrasts in this description, between the Sierra Leone where people of different ethnicities lived alongside one another amicably and the new land where the lust for wealth has divided people into vicious, warring or deeply mutually distrustful camps, and even families are shattered by deaths, hatred and mistrust. The images of “gold and diamonds” representing a happier, more enabling time, clashes against those of “bullet spattered rubbish,” “maggots,” and “water rats with long tails and anxious eyes”. The idyllic version is deliberately presented to us in contrast with the Sierra Leone in which the narrator finds herself at present. Upon comparison, we then appreciate the gravely disabling – indeed, horrifying – nature of this environment, with awareness of the history from which it is emerging. Like the image of the vulture that starts the novel, there is a cluster of images in this passage that eerily evokes the repulsive reality of rot, predation and fear.

If the land is not enough evidence of a history of violence and disablement, the ex-child soldiers definitely are. During her stay in Sierra Leone, the narrator pays a visit to “a care centre for children affected by the war” (31), a euphemistic label for a camp for ex-child soldiers. Her description of the camp is one that portrays it as a place devoid of life. Although it is populated by ex-child soldiers, the description of the place suggests that the life has been sapped from these children’s bodies by the unspeakable things that they did and witnessed.<sup>27</sup> She is shocked to discover that there are “no trees and no flowers [...] the sky was without clouds and the sun was hidden from view. I looked down and the ground was solid yellow dirt with no life. I looked ahead and I saw no women [...] there were no birds in sight” (31). This bleak, depressing environment surrounds the ex-child soldiers, queuing for food.

In considering the characters of these children we must suspend a focus on their individualities for a moment, and instead consider the disabling environments which they have experienced together. This makes it possible to realize that the impact of the war is broad, not limited to these children. At the camp, the description of the dreary environment is outdone by the visible effects of the war on the children:

A boy walked past. Part of his face was missing; his nose slanted to one side and his teeth chattered by themselves. Another passed as if in a dream; insensitive to the flies that played around his head, he opened his mouth in silent protest, displaying discoloured teeth. At his back, from neck to waistline, a bluish-purple gash festered in the heat. I covered my mouth. Anita [...] thrust her arm into the

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<sup>27</sup> There were certain activities that the children were forced to engage in before they could be deemed useful to the rebels. During the war, “[m]any children, particularly those who fought on the side of the RUF, took part in many atrocities, including the amputation and the disembowelment of pregnant women” (Abdullah and Rashid, “Smallest Victims” 240).

bag, bringing out a lotion, which she gently rubbed on his face. The boy let out a mighty sigh and looked at her gratefully. (32)

The narrator is temporarily immobilised by shock at seeing first-hand the physical and mental disablement among the children. One of the boys, Victor, frequently complains that his “head is exploding” (152), suggesting lingering traumatic effects of gunfire or persistent headaches. Another boy, named Corporal Kalashnikov, is a drug addict, having “been in the habit of drinking tea with marijuana and gunpowder mixed in” (37). Kalashnikov is a living reminder of another dimension of disablement attributable to the war – the drug abuse into which many of the child soldiers were forcibly initiated.

Their shared experience of violence is what binds these children. As illustrated above, the experience has left its mark on each one of them – the physical deformities and scars, the dreamlike states, the muteness. There is a clear causal link between violence and disability in this case. Some are mental scars, and some, like the drug addictions, are the lingering results of mechanisms used to cope with the violence. As in *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, for some of these children the horrors of war are continually re-experienced in the mind. This is yet another explicit instance of the disablement that affects the ex-child soldiers. And it is partially for this reason that the camp exists, which again hints at another form of disablement, since this is a group of children deemed incapable of co-existing with ‘normal’ people, by whom they are referred to as “little devils” (20). Jarrett-Macauley’s depiction of them is coloured with sympathy, expressed through the reactions of both Anita and Julia. Pictured this way, the figures of the ex-child soldiers challenge the idea that they are horrific monsters, when they are clearly the war’s worst victims.

Citizen is the prime representative of these children. He is the best example of how war can be a disabling environment not just to this particular child, but to the country as a whole. And he too bears marks of the violence he lived through. The most obvious are his muteness; his distrust of others; and the nightmares he endures. His reticence is a mark of deeply repressed memories, the first of which is undoubtedly his killing of his grandmother. Indeed, one of the central endeavours of the narrator is to unearth Citizen’s story. But, as the novel illustrates, this is a narrative of violence and tragedy that can only be revealed through patience and by some rather surprising methods. His uncommunicative demeanour is in itself a scar on his ability to vocalise his violent experiences, which nevertheless seem to plague his sleep. Whenever they manifest in public, it is through nightmarish fits, such as one which shocks

the narrator into a realization of just how dehumanising Citizen's experiences were and how this type of disablement lasts long beyond the war's cessation:

'What's the matter, little boy?' I called. He whimpered and slumped to the floor. I went to stand by him, reaching out to touch him. Without warning he jumped to his feet, shouting into the air, hitting and punching in a way that suggested combat with several ghostly enemies. Sounds emerged from his lips but nothing we could make sense of, no actual words – just noises and grunts that until that moment had been pinioned beneath his tongue. Alone, he battled, then cautiously straightened, as though in fear of being hit back. (41)

This passage suggests the persistence of the world of violence, which refuses to remain in the past. It ridicules the appellation "little boy" which the narrator uses, as Citizen engages in a display of aggression that could only have been cultivated during the war, possibly as a means of survival. In addition, he bears a more explicit feature, a branding: "the number 439K cut into his back" (46). This number, his identity during the war, also serves as a link to that difficult period.<sup>28</sup> In his discussion of child soldiers in Uganda, Donald H. Dunson opines that the youth "are both innocent victims and guilty perpetrators" (8), a position which we must recognize in Citizen as well. His number is a grim reminder of that phase of his life, as an agent of the violent acts he cannot talk of, and probably as a witness of other horrific events. This world of violence is a stubborn presence through these scars – physical and mental – threatening to keep him forever othered. In the midst of these memories, the narrator's attempts to reach out to his humanity (and that of the other children) are admirable and – if the end of the novel is anything to go by – likely to yield her desired goal. We depend on Julia's imaginative narrative style to get glimpses of the actual war period. Therefore, the disabling atmosphere of war that the children lived through could be seen as being thrice removed from actuality. It is an imagined reality by a character imagined by the author. Regardless, it is important in being an empathetic effort on Julia's part. It is in this space that she imagines "multidimensional events" (93) in the children's life in the "number-one-burning-houses unit"; their misery at being torn from their parents; and how they are punished when they dare to voice their longing for their relatives. In her dream-like state, she imagines them getting addicted to drugs, which the commanders use to make them fearless. They are forced to beat their 'weaker' comrades to death, or risk getting punished. These

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<sup>28</sup> The brand on Citizen's back evokes the branding received by children during an initiation process that the RUF forced them through. The tattoos marked them as RUF recruits (Abdullah and Rashid, "Smallest Victims" 242) and helped in creating group solidarity (Denov 106). Lansana Gberie records that "[i]n the early stages of the war abducted children were made to commit atrocities against family members, then the letters 'RUF' were cut into their bodies, after which the wound was rubbed with lime to prevent it from being effaced" (150). Thus their 'moral marking' as children who had committed atrocities was made physically ineffaceable.

children are witnesses to (and, it is suggested, causes of) “people defecating like wild beasts in terror. Parents burnt alive in front of their children, every ugly death; multiple rapes, single rape, gang rape, rape of pregnant women, daily rape, rape over a fortnight” (54).<sup>29</sup>

Despite the clear connections between violence and disablement depicted in the novel, Jarrett-Macauley’s style succeeds in redeeming these characters. She does not render them as saints, but she also avoids casting them as hopelessly piteous figures. The imaginary Sierra Leone provides a space separate from the disabling environment in which Julia finds herself. It is a better world than the bleak picture described at the beginning of the novel. In this imaginary space, she is able to reach out to Citizen and the other children. She creates a parallel, imagined reality where these children have the chance to display the resilience of their humanity. It is this imagined space, more than anything else, which enables her to finally form a bond of sorts with Citizen.

## **Conclusion**

The intention of the chapter has been to highlight how these texts move beyond highlighting links between disablement and violence, to showing how some people manage to remain resilient in spite of various horrific experiences. The texts themselves shape a space of enablement through the act of representation, since they highlight various instances and forms of injustice and oppression. In this regard, they can be read as enabling in purpose and possibly in effect. This is not only in their featuring characters who undergo various forms of suffering, but also in employing unexpected characters, including those deemed ‘different’, to present rarely noticed slices of history. This affords the reader/viewer an unusual perspective on the various histories of violence and disablement. These narratives enable a fresh look at history through the centring of lives and experiences of people dis(en)abled in these violent conflicts. This process of ‘re-storying’ therefore restores neglected chapters of history to the foreground, and also gives voice to the stories of people whose experiences of disablement are rarely part of official historical records.

These same stories are counter-narratives against violence. The act of challenging violent dis(en)ablement is done firstly through the practically significant function of archiving details of these tragic moments in history. Although they all carry the tag of ‘fiction’, the historical

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<sup>29</sup> Many of these “kidnapped or better still captured children experienced their initial baptism of fire when the older combatants forced drugs down their throats, threatened them with execution mafia-style or made them witness or participate in atrocities against their communities” (Abdullah and Rashid, "Smallest Victims" 242).

context that the plots depend on means that these texts, in their own, powerfully affective way, are attempts to keep these moments in history alive, and indeed to set the record straight where events have been misrepresented or obscured from the public eye. The challenge is further strengthened through the qualities of courage and compassion evident in these narratives, balancing their evidence of ruthless cruelties. Through the witnessing of both suffering and endurance, these texts insist on the significance and value of African lives.

### Chapter 3: Tracking the Social – the Power of the Normate?

“...in narratives as action, [...] every myth can be challenged”.

(María Pía Lara, *Moral Textures* 17)

#### Introduction

In making the argument that normalcy depends on the disabled body to define itself, Lennard Davis argues that one way in which this is done is through the very world in which we live, which is mainly designed to accommodate the non-disabled anatomy. According to him, “in ableist society, the ‘normal’ people have constructed the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 10). It is important to take note here of his accommodation of both material and cognitive construction, in which he refers to infrastructure, policies and attitudes that circulate among the inhabitants of various societies. It also means that an ableist expectation gets imposed upon most human bodies. Davis’s description of the ableist world explains why the disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson would argue that “disability is not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 6). The description is derived from the fact that disabled characters ‘deviate’ from what is considered the norm in their societies.

I want to hinge the theoretical vocabulary of this chapter on a concept proposed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. She introduces the concept “misfitting” as a way of highlighting the experiences of the disabled body in the ableist world. As she presents it, the concept has to do with the incompatibility of the disabled body with this world which is designed to cater mainly for the able-bodied anatomy. Misfitting, she tells us, occurs when there is a discrepancy in the “dynamic encounter between flesh and world” (Garland-Thomson, "Misfits" 592). The misfit therefore designates the body that fails to fit in a given context. The term might be better understood if we recall another term – “normate” – which she coins in an earlier publication. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, she coins the neologism “normate” to designate able-bodied people in society, “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). Both of these terms lay emphasis on the disabled character as one who exists not in isolation, but in particular social contexts, among other people. Misfitting implies a world in which a character does not fit, while the definition

Garland-Thomson provides for the normate indicates the socially constructed nature of that identity.

Given the stress on the 'norm' in social exchange, this chapter argues that the selected texts figure interactions between disabled and non-disabled characters not only as crucial moments of disability construction, but also as moments of enablement. The framing of this chapter relies on an imagined borderline separating disabled characters from non-disabled characters. My aim is therefore to explore this meeting point, to investigate the interplay that occurs at this site of interaction, in the process revealing how attitudes towards disablement are revealed (or hidden or veiled) and challenged in the public space. This space, which I term the dis/ability zone, is the stage for various kinds of contact between disabled characters and normates, as well as portraying interactions with the physical world. The chapter focuses on these interactions as depicted across three texts, namely *Xala*, *Zulu Love Letter* and *Moses, Citizen & Me*. My framing of this zone is inspired by Mary Louise Pratt's conceptualizing of the "contact zone", which she describes as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Whereas Pratt's concept helpfully highlights cultural contact and its outcomes, the dis/ability zone is similarly an area that draws attention to the disabled character's encounter with the ableist world. A way of studying this contact zone is first to consider the role of the family or the home in the lives of the disabled characters. Usually the most intimate of spaces, the family can be both hostile and supportive to the disabled character. For instance, in some parts of Kenya and Zimbabwe, families regard their disabled children as a source of shame or a curse (Munyi). In spite of this, there are also countless examples of families that have displayed support for relatives who are disabled. In fact, as Tom Shakespeare observes, "while in all societies family members provide care, in non-Western societies it is more common, and more culturally normative, for people with disabilities to be supported within the family and community" ("Developing Countries" 273). The family unit therefore becomes "the space where emotional bonds and a shared orientation of values are first developed" (Quayson, *Calibrations* 105). Taking this space as the initial site of interaction, this chapter examines just how much the dissonance that emerges in interactions between the disabled characters and the ableist world is affected by interactions within the family space. The portrayed home lives of all of these characters

involve close family relations, who are crucial to the way the disablement is constructed around the central characters.

Commencing with Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (film and novel), the chapter focuses on the treatment of the marginalised characters (El Hadji and the beggars) by the rest of the society, and the way the filmmaker permits them to traverse the dis/ability zone. Furthermore, in this text, the interaction of the two sets of characters is made complex by the entry of class as a marginalising factor that intersects with disability. In Ramadan Suleman's *Zulu Love Letter*, focus is on the depiction of the interaction between the world of the deaf (represented by Simangaliso) and that of the hearing.<sup>30</sup> Finally, Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* is examined with the aim of illustrating how the dis/ability zone is created by the stigma attached to ex-child soldiers, such as Citizen, by their immediate community. As illustrated in the examination, misfitting does not only occur in the meeting between body and world, as Garland-Thomson stipulates, but also in the interactions between 'normal' bodies and disabled ones. It is in this borderline region, the meeting place of the disabled and the non-disabled, where I construct my argument. This region of interaction is a space of revelation, in terms of showcasing preconceived notions of belonging as well as those of rejection. Even more importantly, existing as a space with the potential for disrupting old 'truths' and creating new ones, this region stresses the importance of the text as a site for narrative enablement. Through the featuring of such zones, the filmmakers and writers crucially articulate alternative (literary or cinematographic) interventions into a field that is currently dominated by medical and anthropological epistemologies.

On a broader level, the texts discussed below hint at new perspectives for conceptualising disablement. In her book, *Moral Textures*, María Pía Lara argues that "the act of telling the story is also one of projecting it into the future" (71). Part of Lara's aim in her text is to argue for the link between narratives and the moral sphere, and she makes this argument by proposing the "illocutionary force" with which texts (especially women's narratives) eventually breach the borders to enter the public sphere. Lara's ultimate aim in *Moral*

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<sup>30</sup> Deafness as a category of disability can be quite complex. It is regarded by some as a linguistic category, due to the centrality of sign language to the deaf community. Another argument usually proffered is the fact that in the Deaf community, the deaf do not regard themselves as disabled (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 3; Scully, *Disability Bioethics* 29). Nevertheless, *Zulu Love Letter* is featured here due to the way that, in spite of arguments to the contrary, deafness remains a constructed category of disability arising from interactions with the ableist community, most of whom do not have any sign-language proficiency. As with this example, the medium of film "constitutes a particularly unique piece of evidence for a cultural or social analysis of the deaf community, since it is the only medium that can express the visual signed communication system of deaf individuals" (Schuchman 5).

*Textures* is to illustrate how the significance of narratives transcends the aesthetic and moral planes and eventually enters the political sphere. The dis/ability space that emerges in these narratives is a location at which moral attitudes become evident, usually in a process that Quayson describes as dissonance (*Calibrations* 103). He draws this term from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who indeed describes the encounter between the disabled and the nondisabled as being fraught with a medley of emotions: “the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 12). This variety of reactions indicates how this moment can be crucial – indeed formative – for ensuing relations between the disabled person and the non-disabled one. Beyond this moment, however, the novels and films serve a greater function of highlighting new ways of thinking of disablement, which is indeed the unique contribution of the creative imagination to disability studies. They therefore embody the greater enabling function of creativity, seen here in the suggestion of possibilities as yet unrealized.

### **Interrogating ‘abilities’: *Xala***

Of all the texts examined in this study, *Xala* is perhaps the one that has (so far) attracted the most scholarly attention. In spite its canonical position within African literature, however, there is almost no existing analysis directed towards the novel and/or film from a disability studies perspective. With *Xala*, Sembène put his writing and directorial skills to the task of criticizing emerging neo-colonial rulers on the African continent, a cadre he labels the “disabled children of French imperialism” (Hennebelle 19). The novel version was released first in 1973 and was followed a year later by the film. The story of *Xala* has been read by most critics as representing “the impotence of the African bourgeoisie as a social class” (Murphy, *Sembène* 100). It follows the character of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, who is struck by the *xala* (the subtitle, “*l’impuissance temporaire*”, is translated as “temporary inability” in the film) moments after marrying his third wife. The film traces El Hadji’s downfall as he seeks a cure for the affliction of sexual impotence. In this chapter, apart from El Hadji, I also focus on the large cast of beggars, most of whom are disabled, who feature in the narrative. These characters play a significant role as othered figures, but are eventually empowered in an unusual fashion, especially towards the close of both the film and the novel. They are very important in providing an opportunity for discussing the dis/ability zone as it is presented in literature, when this group of othered characters encounters those who consider

themselves normal in their society. The text illustrates how, through intersections with class, the dis/ability zone permits the construction and destabilising of disablement.

In their study of disability in African films, Jori de Coster and Patrick Devlieger include an analysis of the image of the disabled characters in *Xala*, and draw the conclusion that in so far as the film focuses on El Hadji, it presents disability “as a temporary condition, as people oscillate between ‘ability’ and ‘disability’” (150). This oscillation hints at the nature of the dis/ability zone, in the way certain characters are able to traverse back and forth across it. The film illustrates that this is possible because in this society, disablement is not only a factor of bodily impairment. Other factors come into play in a manner that appears to amplify, or complicate, the nature of the disablement. The play that occurs at the dis/ability boundary is therefore one manifestation of what Pushpa Naidu Parekh defines as “the space of chiasmatic exchanges of the in-between, points of crossover where borderlines of the center and margins move inwards and across, merging and diverging” (142). This space, which Parekh terms the “postcolonial nexus” is characterised by various identifiers. One crucial point in her observation is the acknowledgement of multiple identifying markers within this space, a point highlighted in the foregoing chapter. *Xala* also invites an intersectional approach through its interlacing of disability with class.

Various scholars have already identified the symbolic function of disability in Sembène’s works, including *Xala*. In Fanonian terms, El Hadji fits the role of the national bourgeoisie identified in the “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” chapter of the seminal text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). His impotence, for example, is said to represent the impotence of the bourgeoisie who take over power from the colonials (Harrow 129; Mushengyezi 51; Gugler and Diop 147). However, through an overlapping of disability with other concerns, bodily difference takes on additional significance that enables the reader/viewer to appreciate how commonly held attitudes about disability give birth to other beliefs that affect our appreciation of the humanity of others. Other scholars have examined the differences between the film version and its print counterpart (see Gugler and Diop 1998, and Messier 2011). While the present analysis accords primacy to the film version, I occasionally employ the novel to fill in gaps left by the visual presentation of the narrative.

The examination of the dis/ability boundary in this text commences by focusing on El Hadji within the family space. He is a character layered with various forms of ‘ability’, such as his economic prowess (highlighted by his membership in the Chamber of Commerce); his

political ability (supported by the point that he considers himself one of those Africans who have succeed in chasing off the colonisers – a point emphasised in the opening scene of the film, when the former, white members of the Chamber are seen exiting the building, giving room to the national bourgeoisie); and his sexual ability (in his role as the patriarch of a polygamous household). Such is his sense of this last ability that he rewards himself with a third wife and rejects the offers of both a herbal aphrodisiac from his friends and the traditional ritual of sitting on a mortar, both of which are intended to reinforce his ‘virility’. However, the reader/viewer realises the illusory nature of these abilities, especially when they all begin to disappear. Furthermore, his exercise of this authority only goes to show its triviality. For instance, when his daughter Rama dares to criticise his polygamous indulgence, he slaps her so hard she falls over. This is a moment where his treatment of the female mirrors the colonialist’s treatment of the colonized native. The authority that El Hadji assumes is here reduced to the mere physical beating of his daughter. This incident is an example of how, for El Hadji, the family space is the ideal one in which to assert his ability. As the narrative progresses, this assumed authority is slowly eroded in a manner that ridicules the protagonist. In fact, as Françoise Pfaff suggests, it is through the women in the film that El Hadji’s authority is diminished (“Three Faces”). In addition, “the [sexual] ‘ability’ of this man may only lasts [*sic*] as long as the wives buy into the system” (Devlieger and de Coster 150). The image that the viewer gets from the earlier depiction of El Hadji in the text is therefore one that reinforces the ideology of ability, to use Tobin Siebers’ terminology, where able-bodiedness is depicted as the key to social acceptance and economic prowess. This linking of physical ability with social acceptance is significant as it is one way in which Sembène interlaces disablement with other concerns (such as gender positioning, in this case).

The chief moment of disablement in the film is when El Hadji is struck by the *xala*, a disablement that takes on many connotations associated with the character’s humanity and his social standing as either a fit or a misfit among his colleagues – the leading men in this society. Again, the reader/viewer recognizes the centrality of the family space as the social area in which the disablement is initially constructed. One would think sexual impotence is a private problem that is to be confined within the walls of the bedroom. However, as one critic observes, “the public and the private [...] are inseparable throughout the [story]” (Chr  ch  in-Adelugba 93). Sexual potency, in particular, is “a universal concern that is even more important in this polygamous society” (Russell 164). Therefore, besides the man and

his wife, there are a number of stakeholders anxiously waiting for confirmation of El Hadji's ability. The bride's aunt, Yay Bineta, for instance, who considers herself "the moral victim" (*Xala* 35) of El Hadji's *xala*, eagerly awaits news of the consummation of the marriage in order to prove to the world that her daughter was a virgin. She is therefore the family agent whose role is to affirm the man's 'ability' to the world outside the home. El Hadji's business colleagues also need his confirmation of his physical prowess to further entrench the façade of hegemonic masculinity that endows them with authority in their community.

Yay Bineta's self-identification as "moral victim" signals another dimension of the text that is also linked to the contact zone between ability and disability. As Mushengyezi observes, *Xala* highlights "two problematic binary oppositions: between the corruption and decadence of foreign influence and the [supposed] purity and morality of African tradition" (47). These binary oppositions extend to those characters deemed 'able' and those considered 'disabled'. One of the main tasks of disability studies is the uprooting of prevalent associations of disablement with immorality. Unfortunately, some of the most canonical representations of disability have perpetuated this link.<sup>31</sup> In *Xala*, we as readers/viewers are intrigued to see whether Sembène makes that daring connection between bodily difference and morality. What he does is rather complex, both employing as well as invalidating the link. In the two sets of characters – El Hadji and the beggars – Sembène presents two different associations with morality. For El Hadji, for instance, the *xala* seems to have been placed on him as punishment for various transgressions (his corruption and licentiousness among them), a view that recalls the ancient Greek understanding of disability as a manifestation of the wrath of the gods (Goodley 6). The disablement of the beggars, on the other hand, draws from both their bodies as well as from poverty and the ableism displayed by the bourgeoisie. It is Sembène's avoidance of stereotypes, "such as depicting the exploiter as ridiculously evil and the exploited as simply heroic" (Gabriel 338) which makes it possible for the audience to feel empathy for both El Hadji and the beggars. In the end, therefore, Sembène unsettles the assumed binary linking disability to immorality and ability to purity.

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<sup>31</sup> Commonly cited examples include Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Shelley's 'monster' in *Frankenstein* and Melville's Ahab in *Moby Dick*. On the African continent, one can easily cite the example of the widespread association of disability with witchcraft. For scholarly work critically engaging with such representations, see Alan Gartner and Tom Joe's edited collection of essays, *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images* (1987), which contains Leonard Kriegel's essay, "The Cripple in Literature". Paul Longmore's "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures" (1985) is another useful article. Another important text in this area is Martin Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994).

El Hadji's *xala* could therefore be read as a form of punishment for his various vices. And as with the authors of *Lyrics Alley*, *The Language of Me* and *Spring Will Come*, Sembène also makes a link here between loss of sexual functionality and (masculine) authority. Within this society,

a man's sterility (or denial of his biological role) not only affects a man and his immediate family but also his entire community. Sterile, he faces a metaphysical drama by disrupting the continuity required by the ancestors who might want to come back to earth through his offspring...[T]he meaning of [El Hadji's] impotence/sterility bears a stigma which is much more tragic than in Western societies since it reaches cosmic and religious dimensions. El Hadji's impotence virtually means "death" for him. (Pfaff, "Three Faces")

The *xala* is therefore a very severe punishment, if indeed we are to interpret it thus. A conclusive statement about the portrayal of disability in *Xala* would be possible at this point if it were not for the other disabled characters in the story – the beggars. These characters make that kind of interpretation invalid. This is because, of all the characters who appear in the story, these are the ones who might be said to set a standard of ethical correctness, yet another point that has the potential to complicate rather than resolve the problem raised by the identification of the *xala* as punishment. They thus disrupt any neat equation between morality and disability. Their harsh treatment at the hands of the authorities (El Hadji among them) casts them in the role of innocent victims, as the unfairly wronged. Furthermore, their willingness to welcome and assist complete strangers proves that Sembène is portraying them as morally admirable persons. The reader/viewer roots for these characters even as they are cast out of the city, and is thus inwardly gratified to see them returning. In the end, El Hadji gets some form of comeuppance from the beggars, who generously baptise him in sputum in his own home as necessitated by the prescribed cure.

Focusing on the emergence of the *xala* presents us with an opportunity to observe the manifestation of the dis/ability boundary outside the family space. As indicated, prior to this development, El Hadji is pretty much regarded as an 'able' individual in his community, by virtue of polygamous marriage, his children, his wealth, and his position at the Chamber of Commerce. When it becomes evident that he has the *xala*, however, this border line emerges, and he finds himself on the 'wrong' side of it. He becomes increasingly alienated from several spheres of his usual daily activities. For example, because he cannot perform his required 'ability,' his masculinity (and by consequence, humanity) is deemed lessened by his new bride N'Gone's aunt, his business colleagues and even himself. The first social circle

that he risks being expelled from is therefore that of men, since he is now known to be incapable of ‘performing’ his masculinity, to adopt a Butlerian turn of phrase. This explains the refrains he utters at several points in the narrative, expressing his desire to be “a man again.” As an adult man in this society, it is expected of him not only to sexually satisfy his older wives and to deflower his newly ‘acquired’ one, but also to honour his financial debts. Failure to perform these duties casts him as a misfit. His body no longer ‘fits’ with other bodies (the Chamber of Commerce), to whom he is suddenly an unwanted presence. It is only upon being evicted from the board that he desperately attempts to take the high moral ground, but by then it is too late.

It is also at this point that the reader/viewer becomes aware of other characters occupying this ‘disabled’ half of the border. The imaginary boundary imitates what Noah McLaughlin calls the “Self/Other dichotomy” in *Xala* (132). In his study, exploring code-use and identity in *Xala*, he argues that “[a]t one end of the spectrum, the supposed ‘Self’ is El Hadji [who] wields an impotent code [...]. At the other end of the spectrum stand Rama, the griot, and the beggars” (McLaughlin 132). For McLaughlin, the main othering factor is language – the “second-order code of commerce,” (132) to be precise. Although his is a sociolinguistic approach, it has the merit of identifying the way various linguistic codes (French and Wolof) assist in creating identity and emphasizing the Self/Other dialectic in the film. Bodily difference and economic class are also shown to play roles as othering and disabling factors, again evoking the Self/Other binary, which is in effect the dis/ability zone. I observed above that the conflict driving the plot centres around El Hadji’s attempts to reverse the *xala*. However, there are other observable simmering conflicts if we shift our focus to the beggars. I want to highlight now the role of these characters in animating this space of interaction with the normates, who ironically are represented chiefly by El Hadji.

That the beggars are on a different side of the divide is evident from their being referred to as “human rubbish” by El Hadji and as “undesirables” by the police at the end of the film. This recalls Lennard Davis’s observation that in most societies at present, the “able body is the body of a citizen” whereas “deformed, deafened, amputated, obese, female, perverse, crippled, maimed, blinded bodies do not make up the body politic” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 71-72). Regarding the ways in which anomalous bodies are removed from the public space in *Xala*, sometimes violently, Davis’s argument indeed rings true. In this society, citizenship is marked by ability, and the police are there to guard against incursion into these ableist spaces. The image of the beggars in procession towards El Hadji’s home at the end of the film is

therefore a powerfully projected challenge to this idea of citizenship. Within the public space, the disabled are deemed as not belonging, as misfits, confirming Garland-Thomson's argument that "[t]o misfit in the public sphere is to be denied full citizenship" ("Misfits" 601). The treatment of the disabled beggars in *Xala* closely mirrors the treatment of similarly disfigured characters in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. The way those beggars are violently kept 'at bay' from the non-disabled is a display of the same ableist contempt evident in *Xala*. It is clear that people like El Hadji merely tolerate the beggars in the society, and do not want them around, especially close to their business premises. The President of the Chamber of Commerce agrees, and calls on the police to round up and deport the beggars, who in his considered opinion, are "bad for tourism". They are packed into a vehicle and taken away from the urban centre. Again this phrase emphasises the denial of citizenship to the disabled characters and their lack of civil power or influence – they are now physically exiled from normate society.

This action highlights the interplay of two related spaces of marginalisation – the physical and the social. By virtue of their bodily condition and their economic position, these characters occupy a location in society where they have minimal, if any, interaction with the likes of the El Hadjis. The labels "human rubbish" and "undesirables" clearly indicate that those who consider themselves normal or 'desirable' do not wish to have any proximity with the beggars. Their very existence is seen as an affront to these types. They are therefore not even to exist within the discourse of the normates in the urban space, discourse characterised by subjects such as trade, economy and commerce. Their social marginalisation (seen in their poverty) swiftly transforms into physical eviction from the public space. This action of removing them from sight confirms the description of disability as a "disruption in the visual field" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 129). It presents to the ableist gaze a spectacle that destabilises assumptions of universality in the form of the body. As such, this "rebellion of the visual [...] must be regulated, rationalized [and] contained" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 129). This is precisely what the removal of the disabled from the streets of Dakar to the outskirts of the city entails; it is a way of controlling the visual field, restoring 'normalcy' to the field of vision, which for these able-bodied characters was disrupted by the anomaly of physical difference. This exclusion of the disabled from the social space restores an illusory form of normalcy, of wholeness. It brings to mind the words of Leonard Kriegel in his classic essay on disability literature: "In a world that possesses surety and optimism, the maimed figure creates discomfort. His wound intrudes, his figure disturbs" (38). With the

‘disturbance’ gone, people like El Hadji are free to pretend that such different bodies do not exist.

What the depiction of these characters achieves so far is an emphasis on the fact that it is being at odds with (misfitting) *other bodies*, not just within the physical world, which emphasises disablement. In the case of *Xala*, it is actually these other normate bodies (represented by the policemen) that literally cast the disabled bodies out of the physical space of the city. The beggars are led by the blind Gorgui who (we later learn) is related to El Hadji (and therefore a family member who was first othered by his relation before being ostracized by the larger society). In a pattern of binary opposites, the beggars initially seem the direct opposite of the affluent, able-bodied businessmen such as El Hadji. The poorest characters in the film are disabled, whereas the most affluent are not only able-bodied, but also brag about their ability in other spheres, as already indicated. Sembène’s film is hence an artistic rendering of a phenomenon that other scholars have also observed on the African continent – the equation of disability with poverty (see, for example, Emmett 2006; Sherry 2007). They are all in agreement that disablement both causes and is caused by poverty. However, a more persuasive reading must recognize the socio-realist significance of Sembène’s deploying of the image of disabled characters. As Marcia Landy argues, the beggars are closest in ideology and practice to Sembène himself. They are “choric commentators or [...] surrogates for the filmmaker” (42). Consistently treated as outcasts – as misfits – in the narrative, they become a cameo by means of which he conveys his social critique of the postcolonial state.

Sembène’s empowering of the disabled beggars occurs in tandem with their acquiring of greater and more forceful narrative presence. After they are deported from the city (at the behest of El Hadji), they make the long trek back to Dakar. This is one of the most moving scenes in the film, especially since it shows socio-economic differences by being in contrast with the opulence displayed in both the motorcade of the members of the Chamber of Commerce and the one that is part of El Hadji’s wedding procession (Lindfors 69). The scene is additionally significant because it is one of those moments when the camera does not focus on El Hadji or anyone directly connected to him. It is also a scene only present in the film version of the narrative (Gugler and Diop 150). Their return to the city is a long drawn out series of shots where Sembène again permits the viewer to stare unreservedly at the disabled figures as they crest sand dunes, assisting each other, until they once again return to the city. This is one moment when an advantage of the film mode over the textual mode becomes evident – as Vartan Messier observes: “the visceral aesthetics of the film utilizes the affective

power of images to produce a lasting impression that transcends the immediacy of the represented historical context....” (2). By giving primacy to the return of the disabled characters, the director imbues these filmed scenes with Lara’s “illocutionary force,” figuratively and literally bringing them into the public sphere, where the viewer cannot ignore them or look away. Their return to the public spheres of the city mirrors their insertion into the visual field by Sembène, and significantly, their attaining of a vital level of primacy in the narrative. Just as the population of Dakar has to acknowledge the humanity of these characters, the viewer too is made to realise their presence and see their lives and social presence as significant.

Although the beggars are a group, Sembène manages successfully to portray them as an isolated lot whose existence in the city is marginal at best. They are constantly under threat from the police authorities, who regard them as misfits and must control their movements so as to avoid offending those who prefer their fields of vision free of disabled characters. Although they are an isolated group, a closer look reveals an attitude of belonging that permeates all the group’s members. This is seen in the way they assist each other on their way back to the city, and share food upon arrival. Equally significant is the fact that this is a group portrayed as ready to admit other people who are also rejected from the public space. The prime examples of this acceptance are the vendor of *Kaddu* (advertised as “The only Wolof language journal” in the film) and Serigne (not to be confused with Serigne Mada, the traditional healer), who are carted off to the outskirts of the city together with the beggars. On their way back to Dakar, these two characters form part of the group of beggars, to the extent that Gorgui offers advice to Serigne to go back home and admit that he has been robbed in the town. The disabled characters’ display of acceptance of other ‘othered’ persons contrasts vividly with the contempt that El Hadji and his cohorts display towards them.

Apart from according them an increased screen presence, empowering – or enabling – these characters is done in a curious, and perhaps quite controversial, fashion. Most othered characters in Sembène’s narratives, argues David Uru Iyam, derive strength from a “survival instinct” that “manifests itself in the strength accumulated through cognizance of self worth and the uncoercible attitude that results from it” (83). In the later stages of the story, the beggars become more central to the plot at the same time that the camera affords them more coverage. The direct ascription of power to these “silent revolutionaries” (Iyam 1986) comes in the form of ritual importance, seen firstly in the figure of Gorgui, who we are told, is responsible for putting the *xala* on El Hadji and also has the power to remove it. The enabling

moment occurs when Gorgui leads the beggars into El Hadji's home and there reveals his relationship to the latter and also claims responsibility for the *xala*.

Leading the way, [Gorgui] pushed open the door, followed by his retinue [...] A legless cripple, his palms and knees covered with black soil from the garden, printed a black trail on the floor like a giant snail. Another with a maggoty face and a hole where his nose had been, his deformed, scarred body visible through his rags, grabbed a white shirt and putting it on admired himself in a mirror, roaring with laughter at the reflection of his antics. A woman with twins, emboldened by the others, tore open a cushion on the settee and wrapped one of her babies in the material. On the other cushion she rested a foot with a cloven heel and stunted toes.... (*Xala* 108)

Not only is this the enabling moment in terms of the characters' acquisition of agency, the actual physical journey into the suburbs – and eventually into El Hadji's home – powerfully signifies the crossing of the dis/ability boundary. In contrast, El Hadji becomes muted from this point onwards; a turn of events which significantly mirrors Sembène's de-centering of this character from the story, as well as a clear indication that he is now in the 'disabled' region of the dis/ability boundary. Perhaps the most potent moment (in terms of meaning) in the film is the scene where the disabled beggars spit on El Hadji as a way of curing him of the *xala*. This moment is identified as one of "ritual cleansing" (Pfaff; Gugler and Diop 151). However, it can also be interpreted as a reversal of the earlier cleansing of the ableist physical space, when the beggars were evicted. It indicates an inversion of authority, echoing the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, further emphasised by the fact that spitting commonly designates a gesture of contempt, usually by one of a higher class.<sup>32</sup> So for the beggars, belonging to the lower social class in this society, to spit on El Hadji indicates an unsettling of (socially constructed) differences, a moment when "Sembène reminds the viewer of the fact that the modern and traditional, power and vulnerability, rich and poor, are intricately intertwined" (Devlieger and de Coster 160). El Hadji is forced to reckon with the fact that he is closely related to the beggars. As a gesture with "spiritual, moral and physical regenerative function – a rite of passage from one state of being to another" (Pfaff, "Three Faces"), the saliva 'bathing' can be interpreted as a type of christening or initiation, establishing an inescapable link between him and them. This scene effectively removes their othered status, as they are admitted into the home of one who has been first in regarding them as "human rubbish".

In so far as the border line between 'ability' and 'disability' is concerned, El Hadji and the beggars serve different functions, but together enable us to draw a single conclusion. Both

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<sup>32</sup> For an example of the application of the carnivalesque to this text, see Lynn (2004).

types of characters appear to cross this line in the course of the story (reflected in actual physical journeys), and the passage of one party involves the other. I conclude therefore that the traversing of this space illustrates the porosity of the border as well as the socially constructed nature of disablement in the text. Sembène succeeds in temporarily shattering and hence challenging the validity of the assumed rigidity of the dis/ability border, in the process also disrupting the link between able-bodiedness and authority.

### **The normate as ‘other’: *Zulu Love Letter***

*Zulu Love Letter* occupies a position within South African filmic production that most film scholars categorise as post-apartheid or post-1994 cinema (Tomaselli 2006; Botha 2007; Dovey 2009). The film is usually located within the class of films inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), or “TRC films” (Kruger 137). These films are seen as “participating in the movement toward a narrative-based form of nation-building by exploring South Africa’s violent past through the mode of fiction” (Dovey 54). The film itself was produced close to a decade after the formation of the TRC (Suleman, "Director's Statement" 30). In the film, this violent past is captured in the experiences of Thandeka Khumalo, a journalist who is haunted by memories of a past that she tries to keep locked up within herself. The title of the film is drawn from some beadwork done by Simangaliso, Thandeka’s 13-year old daughter. Being in the film genre, *Zulu Love Letter* is unique in the way it makes disability part of public discourse. As a work of creativity to be consumed by the public, it convincingly introduces the issue of the public visibility of disability through interactions between Simangaliso and her mother.

In a particularly enabling move, the filmmakers opted to cast a deaf actor (Mpumi Malatsi) to play a deaf character, diverting from the tradition in most films of casting able-bodied actors to play the roles of disabled characters. With this move, the filmmakers acknowledge the “Nothing about us without us” slogan employed by many disability activism organisations worldwide. The implication for this was that the other actors on the set had to learn a bit of sign language in order to interact with the deaf actress. Instances such as these, outside the artistic work, serve to erase that division between disabled people and the non-disabled. Further, it affords agency to disabled people, who, as in this case, are then able to represent themselves, thus avoiding what Tobin Siebers calls “disability drag” (*Disability Theory* 114), a phenomenon which occurs when able-bodied actors play disabled characters, resulting in the emphasis on “spoiled identity” (*Disability Theory* 115). As the film director observes, the

engagements between Mpumi and the rest of the team led them to “[discover] the intricacies of the deaf world and also the ignorance and arrogance of the ‘speaking world’” (Suleman, "Director's Statement" 28). This indicates that enablement is not only unilateral – applicable only to the disabled person.

In a way, the approach in this section parallels that adopted in the first chapter of this thesis, where I focused on father-son relationships. To explore the dynamics of the dis/ability space in this film, we need to examine mother-daughter relations, particularly involving the two central characters, Thandeka and Simangaliso. Their relationship is one “characterized by profound affection and by troubling misunderstandings” (Kruger 145). Its complexity is informed by a number of factors, including Simangaliso’s deafness, Thandeka’s ineptitude at sign language, as well as their personal relation to the haunting past of apartheid. Being deaf, Simangaliso has what could be regarded as an “invisible disability” (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 77). The impairment is not immediately evident whenever she is in the public space. Remarkably, her use of sign language does not raise barriers between her and most of the able-bodied people she interacts with. Ato Quayson observes that invisible disabilities “are thought to disrupt the smooth predictabilities of social encounters, thus suggesting in themselves a certain dissonance on a different scale from those with manifest disabilities” (*Calibrations* 103). It is this dissonance that sometimes leads disabled characters to hide their disabilities, to avoid the awkwardness that occurs when disclosing their disability to the able-bodied for the first time. Tobin Siebers (2008) refers to this tendency, similar to “passing” in racial politics, as a playing of masquerade. The relationship between mother and child in *Zulu Love Letter* does not exactly reflect such a “masquerade”. Instead, it is the mother who is reluctant to acknowledge her daughter’s disability. The relationship between the two is an opportunity that the director takes to challenge presumptions of disability that the able-bodied members of society tend to have. Disability is portrayed in this film as both an experienced condition and a symbolic device. *Zulu Love Letter* is an apt illustration of the fluid nature of the dis/ability space, especially with regard to deafness. This fluidity derives from the fact that it requires the presence of a person with an ableist attitude in order for Simangaliso to be seen as disabled. And throughout the entire movie, it is only Thandeka who unwittingly treats her daughter as disabled. Thandeka is the only character who misreads her daughter’s personality. This is surprising since she is Simangaliso’s mother and lives with her. Such misreading of her daughter is particularly glaring and hints at Thandeka’s own sense of dis(en)ablement as a consequence of her terrible experiences of apartheid violence and

brutality. Her “traumatic memory presents a psychological disability more difficult to negotiate than the physical disability that originates in” the beatings Thandeka received while pregnant in prison (Kruger 145).

Another important feature of the film is the fact that both of the main characters are female. This is both an empowering and significantly complicating move. This is because, if we proceed on the assumption of a space where ability and disability meet, then that zone is further complicated by the introduction of gender as a marker of identity, separate from bodily appearance and function. Females are the ones with agency in the film. In line with such characterisation, Simangaliso is portrayed as neither helpless nor dependent on able-bodied characters in the film. According to Jacqueline Maingard:

The film valorises the position of women as wise harbingers of the solutions to the questions posed by the excavation of the national past, both literally, through the discovery of skeletal remains from apartheid assassinations, and figuratively, through memories and experiences. The communal engagement in these matters acts as an adjunct to the deliberations of the TRC and posits a ritual, religious-humanist response to apartheid assassinations and their significance for on-going life. The nation space of this film is occupied by the black mothers/women, both of the past and the future. (*National Cinema* 1-2)

Indeed as one watches the film, one realises that the central space of the narrative is occupied by females – Thandeka and Simangaliso (and later, Me’Tau). Giving primacy to a character who is female and one who is both female and disabled and so young is a significantly empowering strategy. It enables the director to simultaneously address three levels of marginalisation, not only by giving presence to the characters, but also through presenting them as complex beings. As a disabled child, Simangaliso fits the label of what Clare Barker in *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* calls “exceptional children”, i.e. those “[who] evoke the themes of development, inclusivity and healing that are so relevant to postcolonial cultures establishing identities and norms” (3). Indeed, “[Simangaliso] has a critical place incorporating the promise of new futures post apartheid” (Maingard, *National Cinema* 175). Her youth could therefore be read as bearing hope for a nation and a people profoundly in need of healing. This reading acknowledges the allegorical use of Simangaliso’s youth as heralding an optimistic future. However, even in the course of healing, there are scars that the nation must not ignore. At the same level of allegory, Simangaliso’s disablement draws attention to these wounds. In other words, her youth and disablement represent the director’s way of simultaneously evoking national optimism and the resilience of memory respectively. These two themes are also reflected in the character of Thandeka, particularly in her role as a

mother. She initially comes across as a failure of sorts, an impression created by her alcohol-induced collapse requiring her hospitalization at the beginning of the film, while her estrangement from her daughter further stresses this reading. However, she too is redeemed by the film's end, which indicates that Thandeka experiences a recovery from the horrors of her past.

Fully to appreciate the significance of the female presences in this film, we need to focus on the family space. As in Sembène's *Xala*, family is here featured as a crucial space of enablement or disablement. This is clear in two relationships displayed in the film. The first is that between Simangaliso and her mother, under strain for several reasons, including the trauma in Thandeka's past, as well as the difficulty in communicating with her daughter. The significance of her past here is not only in the horrific memories that plague Thandeka, but also in her lingering, overpowering sense of guilt for having possibly contributed to her daughter's disablement. As Marie Kruger argues, Thandeka's "public acknowledgement of her daughter's disability [which would be the case if she learnt sign language] also implies the much more precarious act of admitting culpability for her daughter's compromised health" (145). Kruger's statement effectively links the two causes of Thandeka's estrangement from her daughter – acknowledging the disability evokes memories of her own trauma, which in turn makes her feel guilty for Simangaliso's disability, ostensibly traceable to that moment of violence when she (pregnant with Simangaliso) was severely beaten under interrogation by apartheid police. Because of this failure to bridge the gap between herself and her daughter, Thandeka could be seen as conferring the label of misfit on Simangaliso, as she does little to help her 'fit' into the ableist society outside the school. Part of Thandeka's personal healing in the film hinges on the realisation that this self-blame immobilises her, and the understanding that Simangaliso is not a 'spoiled being' because of Thandeka's own experience of violence. The second significant female bond is the Simangaliso-MaKhumalo relationship, which is admirable in the harmony evident between grandmother and granddaughter. Like her school, Simangaliso's grandmother's home defines a space where she is not othered. It is in this space that she smiles for most of the film. The destabilising of the dis/ability juncture in this space becomes clear in the disharmony created by Thandeka's presence. Even Moola, Simangaliso's father, who would normally be regarded as the misfit (due to his Indian heritage) fits into this space. He is able to converse with his daughter, and is also welcomed by Thandeka's parents.

We need to go back to the opening scene of the film in order to appreciate the way the relationship between mother and child is initially presented. The first time that we are introduced to Simangaliso, she is sitting on her mother's hospital bed. Thandeka has just awoken from a blackout, and has her hand on Simangaliso's shoulder, rubbing it softly. Simangaliso is facing away from her mother, a distraught look on her face. As an introductory scene to these two key characters, this image signifies several important points regarding their relationship. In the first place, it is significant that the director presents mother and daughter in a scene that overturns the ability/disability binary. At this point, the viewer does not know that Simangaliso is deaf. Nevertheless, she is presented as the 'able' being in this scene, as well as putting her in the mothering, nurturing role. Thandeka, lying on the hospital bed, is the one portrayed as in need of help (prior to this scene, she is found unconscious in her car, a pool of vomit at her feet). She is the 'disabled' one in this sense, an impression that is also vocalised by one of the characters later in the film. This is a visual tactic that is effective in destabilizing notions of power associated with the able body, and blurring that interstitial space between the 'normal' and 'abnormal' body.

Furthermore, Simangaliso's positioning on the bed signals a difficulty in the relationship between the two. Thandeka's hand on her daughter's shoulder is a gesture that signifies affection, but at the same time also appears as a communicative act. The film has many of such moments where emotions are communicated through look and touch, where words appear flat and lacking in power for the affective message that the character wishes to convey. At this moment, Simangaliso's emotional state is conveyed through a visual illusion that the director employs. From Simangaliso's perspective, the viewer witnesses the slow-motion drooping of orange daisies placed by the bedside. This wilting of the flowers is overtly symbolic, simultaneously communicating Simangaliso's sadness over her mother's current state, as well as the latter's breakdown. And perhaps even more significantly, the image enhances the message that some points are best communicated without vocalisation. This moment further illustrates the communication divide between the two. According to Maingard, Thandeka does not appreciate "the depth of [Simangaliso's] perceptions" or the "magical quality" that makes her aware of what goes on around her in ways that seem beyond her age in their maturity (*National Cinema* 175). Maingard does not clarify exactly what this "magical quality" is.

Yet *Zulu Love Letter* empowers Simangaliso precisely by not presenting her as an extraordinary or special character. Paradoxically, what is to be commended about the way her

character is portrayed is precisely that there is nothing remarkable or “magical” about her. She is neither an absurdly superhuman character with supernatural abilities, nor a tragically dependent character who appeals to the viewer’s pity. She sleepwalks and has dreams, but those are hardly superhuman feats. Instead, the dreamlike scenes serve to highlight a fear of misfitting that is linked to her mother’s attitude towards her past. If we are to employ Kriegel’s (1987) categories of the characterisation of disabled characters, Simangaliso would appear as that character whose disability is not emphasised at the expense of her other personality traits. I strongly agree with Lennard Davis’s observation regarding the tendency to read disability as an avenue to special insight, which he sees as “[reinforcing] a tendency to denigrate disability”:

By denigration, I include the process by which people with disabilities are portrayed as ‘heroic,’ and ‘special.’ Privileging the inherent powers of the blind or the deaf is a form of patronizing. In the same way that women were seen as the moral center of European culture, their moral space carved out on the body of their oppression, or the subaltern was seen as the cynosure of mystical and erotic forces, so too does the attempt to redress the disability by attributing higher powers to it actually attempt to erase the difference by dressing it in moral raiment. (*Enforcing Normalcy* 106)

Instead, Simangaliso is a typical teenage girl with fluctuating performance at her school depending on the situation at home, as her school principal indicates later. Her sadness in the hospital scene (graphically presented through the drooping flowers) is the sadness of any young girl at finding her mother in a hospital bed. It is sadness that derives not just from this moment, but from a concern with her mother’s unwillingness to speak out about the ghosts of her past. For this reason, the tag of a “magical quality” ascribed to Simangaliso sounds rather patronizing, regardless of the critic’s original intent.

Maingard is more accurate when she describes *Zulu Love Letter* as a story “where meanings are never complete and the viewer is constantly invited to create narrative coherence” (*National Cinema* 1). The relationship between Thandeka and Simangaliso is a case in point. The fact that their relationship is strained is clear from the beginning, but the viewer has no inkling as to the cause of this strain. We are invited to fill in gaps based on the actions of the two women. The initial character presentation of Thandeka is not flattering at all. She is depicted as an intensely angry woman, a fury which finds its outlet at her workplace, the editorial offices of the *Mail & Guardian*. Misplaced as it is, this fury hints at the profound disenfranchisement that comes from a feeling of both guilt and injustice:

She feels betrayed by an editor whom she has always suspected of collaborating with the apartheid authorities, by the new political dispensation and its unwillingness to compensate the victims and prosecute the perpetrators, and by her parents who are critical of Thandeka's passionate commitment to the political struggle [at the expense of spending time with her daughter]. (Kruger 138)

It is therefore this same ire that is partially to blame for her strained relationship with her parents. In sharp contrast, Simangaliso gets along very well with her grandparents. The grandmother, in particular, is shown to be proficient in sign language, by means of which she and her granddaughter converse. This aspect of communication is central in the sense that it is one way in which the deaf character, Simangaliso, is displaced from the 'disabled' space. In the literary space, observes Lennard Davis, deafness has often been figured as absence of language, and therefore of meaning (as opposed to blindness, which is often accorded special insight) (*Enforcing Normalcy* 105). Given such an association, the enabling function of sign language in this household becomes even clearer. This system of signification "occupies an interstice where space and silence come together [...] a locus where body meets language" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 117). Unlike the written text, where words are used to "[create] the illusion of materiality" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 117), the film medium does not depend on such an effect. The visually and audibly confirmed presence of the deaf character, as well as her 'readable' sign language, militates against her erasure from the social space. Simangaliso's sign language conversations with her grandmother 'normalise' her role as the disabled character in the film. Her grandparents' home thus becomes a space of enablement for this character, thanks to the way she interacts with them.

Away from the family, perhaps the main space of enablement presented in the film is Simangaliso's school. The first time this space is introduced serves to illustrate the constructed nature of this border between disablement and ability. The film shows Simangaliso giving a presentation to her classmates, using sign language. Apart from revealing her narrative ability, the scene further develops the theme of belonging that is constantly evoked in the narrative. In the first place, the school is evoked throughout as a place where the deaf students are made to feel 'enabled'. Significantly, this sense of belonging is not limited to the school setup, but is also evoked outside the boundaries of the institution, through Simangaliso's interactions with friends and family. However, the school space also attracts another interpretation, especially if we read this space as an institution that also serves to shield the deaf girls from the ableist public space. It could be seen as one of many institutions that render disabled people invisible to the ableist public (Erevelles 122).

On the surface level, it serves to remind them of their humanity. However, this is also a space that marks certain boundaries for the disabled. It is mainly within this school space that Simangaliso feels at home, amongst people who do not see her in terms of her disability. It is a space that ensures her safety. The car accident that she has later with her father (where he dies) cements this fact. The accident appears to add emphasis to the point that the world outside the school for the deaf is a space in which she is rendered a misfit.

The destabilising of the dis/ability binary is further complicated by the characterisation of Thandeka. Her past testifies to the formidable quality of her character, having been a staunch anti-apartheid activist and a woman unafraid to speak her mind. However, she is a rather isolated figure in relation to the others in the film. For instance, her anger at the workplace seems misplaced, as everyone else regards her as the misfit in that space. This misfitting stems from Thandeka's difficulty in reconciling the "moral responsibility based on the agency of her present self and the disenfranchisement she suffered in the past" (Kruger 146). She seems to be isolated in her refusal to let go of the past, a past which, in her eyes, her workmates appear to have forgotten. Her misfitting thus also has temporal dimensions. This destabilising is most clearly displayed during Thandeka's visit to Simangaliso's school. The principal of the school makes an observation that captures the destabilising of the dis/ability border in the film when she says to Thandeka:

Here in this environment all the girls are 'normal' ...to use a word I absolutely detest. Here they have many ways of speaking and hearing, whether it's by sign language, art, lip reading, feeling vibrations. In fact, here it is you who are disabled. (Peterson and Suleman 50)

As the one moment in the film where the word *disabled* is explicitly referenced, it is worth dwelling upon. The principal takes pride in the fact that the school environment succeeds in removing any association of deafness with abnormality or deficiency. This environment nurtures a feeling of normality in the girls, thus affirming their humanity. In the film, as Thandeka converses with the principal, they pass by a number of multiracial groups of girls excitedly engaged in teenage banter, all done through signing. This scene reflects the sense of belonging in deaf communities, as Lennard Davis observes:

unlike other people with disabilities, the Deaf have a community, a history, a culture [...]. There is within the Deaf world a body of 'literature' including written as well as signed works, a theatrical/choreographic tradition, academic discursive practices, pedagogic/ideological institutions, and so on. (*Enforcing Normalcy* 78)

This sense of community is portrayed through Simangaliso's interactions with other deaf characters. However, the support that is rendered towards the disabled character in this film hints at another aspect of social disablement on the continent as a whole. Simangaliso's family is very supportive, and she attends a school that fosters self-worth. This is in contrast to the way disability is portrayed in some of the other texts, including *Xala* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. All these texts point towards the social realities of disablement on the African continent. Cases where the disabled person has access to proper education and support outside their immediate families are rare, although they are indeed improving. Compared to the developed world, however, disablement is compounded in Africa by poverty. Therefore, beyond ableist attitudes, class plays a major role in either diminishing or accentuating the disablement.

In *Zulu Love Letter*, the school community fosters feelings of belonging and enablement. In the school scene in *Zulu Love Letter*, enablement is achieved in two ways. The first is the manner in which the girls interact – without any apprehension. The second is a subtle testament to the multiracial 'new' South Africa, where it is possible to forge friendships across previously rigid colour boundaries. The relationships among these girls indicate an erasure of skin colour as an othering factor. Above all, this scene attests to the idea that disability does not necessarily hamper one's ability to fit within the social space. The bubbly interactions among the students clearly indicate that fact.

Instead, it is Thandeka who feels othered in this environment. This is particularly obvious once it is revealed that she cannot communicate in sign language, unlike Moola, Simangaliso's father. Her inability to use this language is but one cog in the complex machinery of estrangement that distances her from her daughter. In many works of literature, argues Davis, deafness functions as "absence of language. And since language is seen as human, as 'us,' the deaf are seen as 'not us'" (*Enforcing Normalcy* 113). Suleman resists the temptation to deploy this characterisation tactic in his film. It is only Thandeka who appears to subscribe to this understanding of deafness. Due to her estrangement from her daughter, she is slow in recognizing the fact that "the child she left with her parents is now a young woman with a personality and ideas of her own" (Peterson, "Dignity" 224). And it is this young woman who defies 'othering' in the film.

According to Marie Kruger, communication holds a central role in the film. In particular, the film highlights the paucity of the spoken word as a mode of communication, and instead

points towards alternative modes of communicating difficult emotions. This is illustrated by Thandeka's refusal to divulge the events of her past to her daughter and to see in Simangaliso a potential "empathetic listener" (Kruger 145). Incidentally, this is related to an argument that Bhekizizwe Peterson makes critiquing the [closing] book metaphor used to imagine the moment of transition in South Africa's history. In his opinion, "traumatized individuals do not always apprehend time as a neat and chronological sequence nor do they attach the same significance to the relation between time and experience as metaphors of the book and state ideologues do" ("Dignity" 229). This explains Thandeka's difficulty in simply moving on with her life, since for people like her "closing the book on the past" implies "a deep sense and practice of amnesia that ignores the anomalies and pains of the present and their possible effects on the future" ("Dignity" 219). Concerning the difficulties in articulation, Kruger detects in *Zulu Love Letter* parallels between the trauma of apartheid and that of the holocaust in terms of the difficulty of voicing traumatic experience. In this regard, she applies insights from Joshua Hirsch's work in reading traumatic memory. Thandeka's communication difficulties, she states:

[...] demonstrate the limitations of language and memory to convey the atrocities witnessed [during the anti-apartheid struggle]. The complex layering of sounds and images in the film's opening scenes, of amplified and isolated, blurred and delayed fragments of memory, testifies to 'the speechless terror' Thandeka has lived through, an experience that 'cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level [...]' (Hirsch 23). The rich sensory texture of Thandeka's flashbacks probes the limits of language, even while replicating the incoherence of traumatic witnessing in an effort to make the anguish of the protagonist accessible to a sympathetic audience. The search for a language in which to communicate what appears to defy the human imagination emerges as one of the film's central topics on the formal as well as on the thematic level. (144-145)

It is on this plane that the young girl's disability takes on a broader significance. At a symbolic level, Simangaliso, or rather, her deafness, represents that difficulty of articulating the horrors that not only Thandeka, but the entire nation, experienced. The film suggests that Simangaliso's deafness is a result of the beatings her mother endured. This creates a link between them. As one critic suggests, the disability possibly "enhances the emotional sensitivity and sensory depth with which she 'reads' her mother's troubled mind" (Kruger 145). In this way, she too shares in the traumatic memory of the past, seen through various "interludes" that she has in the film.

These “interludes” include nightmares and the sleepwalking episodes which plague Simangaliso in the film, acting as further manifestations of her inner thoughts and fears. These occur on two occasions, and are both linked to Thandeka’s past. In the first instance, Simangaliso sleepwalks while in the school dormitory. In this sequence, she goes to the science laboratory, where water begins to pour out of a tap. The water moves towards her as she sits alone at the end of a corridor. Maingard reads this scene as signifying a “cleansing in process, where clear waters are washing clean the pain of the past” (*National Cinema* 176). However, there is another interpretation that can be gleaned from the scene. This is one which emphasises Simangaliso’s isolation and sense of vulnerability. In her sleepwalking state, she is alone, and the water moves towards her in a manner that seems rather ominous. This could indicate a fear of being isolated, a fear which in that moment has actually been realised since she is alone at the school dormitory. The next nightmarish scene occurs later in the film when Simangaliso flips through her mother’s files, which contain information related to her journalism work. Highlighted in the file are pictures of Dineo, whose memory still haunts Thandeka.<sup>33</sup> The dream sequence here shows Simangaliso floating out of the window, and eventually transferred to a field resplendent with yellow flowers. In this field she meets a group of traditionally clad women, as though in preparation for a wedding. What is undoubtedly a blissful dream then swiftly changes when gunshots ring out and these women disappear, only to be replaced by three assassins, who walk threateningly towards Simangaliso.

Kruger argues that these nightmares are born out of Thandeka’s refusal to talk to her daughter about her past. Thandeka’s attempts “to shield [Simangaliso] from the corrosive effects of traumatic experiences, [have] the adverse effect on Simangaliso whose repeated nightmares translate her confusion into frightening scenes of physical danger” (Kruger 145). These extra-sensory episodes echo the stylistic portrayal of the dis(en)abled character adopted by Jarrett-Macauley in *Moses, Citizen & Me*, where the narrator creates her own metaphysical plane on which to interact with the characters. Incidentally, Thandeka’s maternal instinct of protection also mirrors Sara’s self-inflicted violence in *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze*. Both mothers seek to protect their children. But their ways of doing so end up being more harmful to the children. Taken together, these texts offer a way of reading disablement that ignores the usual

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<sup>33</sup> Dineo, Me’Tau’s daughter, is in the film depicted as a young anti-apartheid activist who was murdered by state police assassins. Several of Thandeka’s flashbacks show that she witnessed Dineo’s death. This is one of the memories that constitute both Thandeka’s trauma and her sense of injustice, since Dineo’s murderers are still walking about freely.

boundaries between the body and the mind, and instead offer a possibly novel way of understanding disablement as not just a factor of these binaries, but also as a phenomenon that is heavily affected by emotional bonds between the disabled character and those that they may be close to. Understanding disablement in this way is closer to what Patrick Devlieger proposes when he states that in African societies, disability is more of an “embedded concept,” to be understood not as being an individual experience, but rather one associated with the natural order, the social order, and the cosmological order (“Experience” 695). With regard to Simangaliso, the nightmares can be symbolically interpreted as threats of being rendered a misfit in her society. The link between Simangaliso and her mother means that she too “bears witness to the haunting presence of the past” (Kruger 145). And for the child, the past serves to keep her isolated. Read in this light, the viewer can understand Simangaliso’s desire to testify at the TRC hearings, again emphasising the significant role that communication plays in the film.

With communication at the centre of the film, *Zulu Love Letter* becomes a valuable testimony to the fluidity of the boundary between ability and disability. Thandeka’s reaction to Simangaliso’s car accident is significant in this regard. Prior to the accident, Thandeka herself is a ‘mute’ figure, specifically with regard to the trauma of her past – she never speaks of it. In the earlier scenes of the film, she is the one disabled by history. However, when she learns that her daughter is missing from the accident scene, she makes her way to Councillor Khubeka’s home, where all her anger and frustration are released in an outburst detailing her experiences in detention. In the course of her angry outburst, she tells the councillor of how, while pregnant in detention, she could feel “each kick, each movement, from a child as stubborn as her mother” (Peterson and Suleman 117), even as she was being beaten. This is the first time she speaks of her experiences, which prior to this moment have been presented in the form of very brief flashbacks. It is from this point that she makes the resolve to finally break the silence and tell her story before the TRC as a way of “[ending] the ‘wake in [her] head’” (Peterson and Suleman 110). Furthermore, the viewer gets the impression that her relationship with her daughter will improve, as she tells the councillor, “Excuse me...I have a child to bring up” (Peterson and Suleman 117). The best illustration of hope is carried in the closing scenes, which present cleansing rituals at the spot where Dineo and other activists were buried, and at Me’Tau’s home, where the love letter is placed on a shrine dedicated to Dineo. This scene testifies to the importance of “African ontology – particularly with regards to its elaboration of personhood, sociality and ancestral veneration –

[as offering] a more life-affirming and enriching alternative to the dis(contents) of the narratives and projects of the state” (Peterson, "Dignity" 217). This moment heralds the start of healing for the leading women, drawing comparisons to the way the trope of communal healing is evoked in *Xala* (through the baptism by sputum) and in *Moses, Citizen & Me* (through the imagined Gola forest experiences). If, as Peterson insists, the film is about “two mothers in search of their daughters” ("Writer's Statement" 21), this moment appears to indicate an end to that journey. The complexity of the gaps between mother and daughter in the film, the persistence of history and the style of presentation provide multiple layers of interpretation. In this fashion, the film resists a simple, polarised conclusion, but instead opens up a space for a broader discussion of matters that the film may only hint at. Crucial to this discussion is the way the portrayal of the two women illustrates the social construction of disability and also permits flux within the dis/ability boundary.

### **Imagining spaces of homecoming: *Moses, Citizen & Me***

Perhaps the globally best known narrative about the African child soldier experience, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007), details the way repeated scenes of violence serve to dull compassion and pity in the hearts of teenage soldiers. The result was that these children are often regarded as little demons and feared by many people within their own country. Beah's narrative ends on a somewhat positive note, with the narrator making his passage to the United States to live a life of relative safety and peace, thus “[validating] international humanitarian assistance for child soldiers” (Schultheis 36).

Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel, *Moses, Citizen & Me*, fictionalises a similar experience, focusing on the character of Citizen. In the previous chapter, I explored the way Citizen's (and the other ex-child soldiers') psyche is affected by the violence of the war. His personality in the novel is determined in quite a profound way by what he went through during the war. This chapter explores a different dimension of Citizen's being. This is his social being, or his placement within the social setting to which he returns after the war. A crucial part of this community is his family, or what is left of it. Like the other narratives examined in this chapter, family in Jarrett-Macauley's novel serves both the function of constructing otherness as well as offering a haven of belonging to particular characters. Jarrett-Macauley's portrayal of the treatment of this child by members of his community highlights the way his position as a disabled other is determined and emphasised through his interactions with the 'normal' people in his society, beginning with members of his family. In

our imagined region of the dis/ability boundary, Citizen initially stands on one side, and the narrator, Julia, occupies the other. We can therefore see Julia's endeavours to assist Citizen in the light of someone attempting to help the othered boy cross over or return to the 'normal' side of the divide. As the novel illustrates, this becomes a journey that has implications for both Citizen and the narrator herself.

The imaginary world of the Gola forest permits a glimpse at the alternative community into which the children were thrust when 'conscripted' into the army. The world-changing experiences of this community are based on forcible immersion in violence, the results of which are evident in the physical as well as mental trauma suffered by the children. It is also observable in behavioural patterns for which they are kept from the wider community.<sup>34</sup>

To start with, the reader realises that Citizen (whose birth name is George) is the personification of alienation, which contrasts with the way he got his name. At the age of two, his father named him "First Citizen of the Farm" because "he liked to run the place, be in charge of everybody" (195). As it turns out, in the post-war period, this name is highly ironic since he is denied citizenship in his former community. Citizen occupies a doubly liminal position firstly due to his age (he is eight years old) and secondly due to the mental scarring that renders him unable to utter anything beyond a few monosyllabic words. However, the main reason for his misfitting in his society is the role he played in terrorising the country's citizens during the war. Because of his past deeds, he no longer fits into his community. Like Simangaliso in *Zulu Love Letter*, Citizen is a suitable candidate for Clare Barker's category of "exceptional children", simultaneously "[embodying] the postcolonial nation-state's potential for radical difference and its supposed fragility" (*Postcolonial Fiction* 2). Jarrett-Macauley's characterisation of Citizen shows optimism for the 'recovery' of this particular young character and for the broader setting of Sierra Leone, as it emerges from a recent violent past. For this particular reading, the reintegration of the ex-child soldiers into the community indicates the destabilising of the dis/ability divide.

Destabilising of this divide implies that what is left is not a clear binary between the disabled and the non-disabled. Among characters such as Citizen, for instance, the disablement partly derives from his relationships with other people. Citizen's suspicion of adult human company provides the first clue to the existence of this divide between him and others around him. In

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<sup>34</sup> There is a lot of literature on the process of integrating children into the army. For more on the phenomenon, see Richards (1996); Abdullah and Rashid (2004); and Honwana (2006).

the eyes of Julia, he appears almost aloof, distanced from others: “He came and went as he pleased, like an independent adult” (15). The first time she meets him, the narrator is scared, recognizing a young boy whose “spirit was so far removed from anything I had ever met that I nearly wept” (7). Due to her ex-centric position, Julia’s role as a family member is not straightforward. She is indeed related to Citizen but apart from the kinship, there is no other link between them. As a result, there is no pre-existing bond that she might be seeking to repair. Instead, what she is trying to accomplish is the construction of an all-new relationship between the two of them.

Julia’s initial fear of the boy reveals several aspects of his alienated position. As she points out, he is a boy who does not act his age; who does not conform to the expectations of society; who does not recognise the boundaries he did as a young boy. This alone makes him a strange creature, more so to this ex-centric narrator who did not really know what to expect of her native Sierra Leone. By initially regarding Citizen as strange, Julia is also complicit in the community’s failure to recognize the child’s humanity. Citizen represents different things to different people. To the members of his community, he is monstrous because of his past deeds; to Moses (his grandfather), Citizen is the murderer of his wife; to Julia, he is a strange young boy with whom she has no shared past, and who does not conform to the expectations she has of a boy his age. The first time she meets him, he is depicted “munching on some tobacco like a Cuban plantation worker more than twice his age” (7). And during one scene, “[h]e whimpered and slumped to the floor [...]. Sounds emerged from his lips but nothing we could make sense of, no actual words – just noises and grunts [...].” (41). That Julia is initially unable to reconcile herself to Citizen’s humanity is a significant step in the plot line, and in Jarrett-Macauley’s characterisation of the two characters. The novel’s aim is precisely to salvage Citizen’s humanity, to lead him back across the “bridge to normal childhood” (15). Before doing that, however, the author needs to illustrate the public opinion towards this boy, who has previously been both the perpetrator and victim of violence. Only then can she set off on the mission of reparation, with Julia as her main tool.

Some clarification on the misfitting position of ex-child soldiers in their previous communities will shed light on Citizen’s position in the novel. In her work on child soldiers, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (2006), Alcinda Honwana observes that the appellation “child soldier” is itself oxymoronic, and “signifie[s] the violence that this position does to established social categories” (51). It is this unsettling of social roles, where the child is supposed to be innocent, which disturbs the way people consider a figure like Citizen, who

does not conform to their expectations: “[t]he paradoxical combination of child and soldier is unsettling. Children find themselves in an unsanctioned position between childhood and adulthood. They are still children, but they are no longer innocent; they perform adult tasks, but they are still not yet adults” (Honwana, *Child Soldiers* 5). This description coheres with the identification of characters such as Citizen as misfits in their community. The reason why they are considered odd is that members of the community find it hard to regard them as mere children, given the fact that they have engaged in atrocious acts not commonly connected to childhood. To the members of the community, most of whom have also been victims of violence, behind the deceptively innocent faces lurk pitiless murderers, rapists and thugs.

It is therefore helpful to acknowledge Citizen’s violent experiences in order to appreciate his position. This is where the author’s remarkable style of presenting the horrors of the war is evident. Jarrett-Macauley eschews such violent scenes of his past life, instead providing momentary glimpses, manifested through Citizen’s nightmares. Although these are mere snippets of this other, violent world, they are enough to highlight Citizen’s mental trauma. Like other disabled protagonists in various narratives, Citizen’s character “generates a desire for a story by inviting speculation about both causality [...] and development” (Barker, *Postcolonial Fiction* 12). With regard to Citizen’s story, its fragments are collected at various points in the narrative. Incidentally, it is other characters – not Citizen himself – who provide details of his story. Where some episodes are missing, the narrator provides these through her vivid imagination. These pieces – real and imagined – complete what is an otherwise initially sketchy picture of the young boy, and serve to restore some measure of his humanity. By making Citizen unable to tell his own story, Jarrett-Macauley preserves some sense of his innocence. Only at the end of the story does he encounter an individual who is able to “help position the fragments [of his story], who could tie on the beginning, and middle to the end” (218). This way, Citizen finally pieces together the separate parts of his story.

Citizen’s isolation also reveals how other people feel about him. As a former child soldier, he is ostracised by many within his community, who know of his killing of his grandmother and of his participation in other atrocities during the war. We must here understand the highly significant role of Citizen’s most obvious disablement – his muteness. His reticence provides space for other narratives to emerge and disseminate among the community. For instance, the master narrative of the child soldiers is about “how devious and cruel they were. How they killed without thought, without pity for human life [...]. People said better to throw these

devils into a crypt where skeletons go to live” (78). Anita, Moses’s neighbour, further explains to Julia why Citizen is alienated within the community:

‘...Most people will not even let a child like Citizen near their house after what he’s done. They cannot stand the sight of them. They believe they are little devils. Bad bush.’

‘[...] Who wants a child who only knows how to kill? What kind of nightmare is that? What kind, eh? If they keep these children here, is like keeping something bad in the blood. Something rotten, isn’t?’ (19-20)

The passage above illustrates a form of social disablement, since it is the society here which regards the ex-child soldier as a thing to be reviled. Specifically, it illustrates social stigmatization. Erving Goffman famously defined stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” which “reduce[s] [the victim] from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (*Stigma* 3). This description fits the way the ex-child soldiers are regarded in their former communities. They are regarded as a pestilential presence, as “something rotten,” harbouring malevolent spirits.

Having been reduced to the rot of his society, Citizen stays as much as he can out of everyone’s way, including his grandfather’s. Moses, in particular, is estranged from him because when he looks at Citizen, he cannot help but see the person who shot and killed his beloved wife. As such, Moses is a key figure in the construction of Citizen’s otherness. His own grief renders him unable to recognize the child in Citizen and unable to imagine the grief and guilt – and fear – this child is suffering. Instead, he keeps his distance from the child, as though Citizen were some contamination that he risks catching. There is a terrible stigma associated with child soldiers in this community, which has formerly been riven by such children’s wartime deeds. Anita is the exception, as she holds on to Citizen’s innocence as a child. Regardless, in her eyes, it is Julia who is best placed to help Moses since, “when a boy has killed his family nobody will want him, except somebody distant, somebody from far away” (20). The murder of one’s relations is therefore here read as the ultimate othering act, one which creates alienation from everyone except those “distant”. In Citizen’s case, he must therefore seek belonging from someone with whom there has already been a spatial as well as a generation gap. Within his immediate geographic vicinity, acceptance will be very slow in coming, if at all. Perhaps this is why, as we see at the end, Jarrett-Macauley appears to suggest a different physical location altogether as the best space for healing for Citizen.

As already observed, Julia's objective in the story is to bring Citizen back to the 'normal' side of the dis/ability divide. She seeks to restore Citizen, the "ruined" and "damaged" (16) boy, to 'normalcy,' to get him talking again, to hear his story. A year after being rescued, Citizen is still "the silent boy," but Julia is convinced that he still has the urge to speak (42). However, as she admits in her narrative, her attempts "to bring him back into our life [were] too clumsy" (15). To understand Julia's efforts, we must consider Lennard Davis's observation that "one of the foundational ableist myths of our culture [is] that the norm for humans is to speak and hear, to engage in communication through speaking and hearing" (*Enforcing Normalcy* 15). He deliberately terms it a myth in order to underscore the fallacious nature of this assumption, a point that Julia comes to appreciate. Her journey towards this goal is obviously important to her as well, making her re-appreciate the bonds of family as well as her connection to the continent. Yet she initially goes about it the wrong way, trying to get him to speak, which Citizen does not want to do.

A breakthrough in Julia's interaction with Citizen emerges in the section of the text where Jarrett-Macauley employs the magical realist mode, here observed in the narrator's embarking on several nocturnal escapades to a mystical world. There is a connection between these mystic escapades and the theme of Africa as a homeland. Julia first experiences the magical journey when Anita, Moses' neighbour, decides to plait her hair "correctly," not in the way a Jamaican woman in England had done it:

Her big plaits were a trap, a device for opening up spaces in my head that hadn't been tampered with since I was a girl. She was using this hairdressing ritual to push African 'bush' images in those spaces. I fought back, gathering memories of London – me sampling couchillo olives in a Battersea delicatessen, me catching Eurostar at Waterloo station – but I was losing. The central parting of my head became a valley lying between high mountains. Downstream, circles organizing themselves around my ears transformed into a ravine rushing over yellowed rocks. My head was a map of Sierra Leone, its farmland, diamond mines, mountains, ridges, people, soldiers, fighters, leaders. (51)

Besides the significance of this moment as an entry point to the metaphysical plane of the Gola forest, it serves to stress the re-emergence of the Sierra Leone landscape to the narrator. Describing her head as "a map of Sierra Leone," with its various physical features and people emphasises her immersion in the land. The "opening up [of] spaces in [her] head" paves the way for the journey that she makes to connect with Citizen. Furthermore, it is remarkable how the metaphorical comparison of her hair to the Sierra Leone landscape subtly hints at the need for the land itself to be healed. There are similarities in this instance between Julia and

Thandeka (in *Zulu Love Letter*). Both women embark on journeys across landscapes of trauma, in order to reconnect with specific individuals. For Julia, this is the first moment that she traverses to the other, imaginary dimension, “through a door to another world” (54). From the description above, it is clear that the imaginary journeys are not merely escapist fantasising – they also serve to anchor her in her Sierra Leonean setting, a prerequisite for meeting Citizen on his own turf, as it were, “in an act of creative empathy” (Mackey 235). In these adventures she witnesses the children’s gradual loss of their innocence through violence committed by or against them. Later, within this imaginary world, she joins the child soldiers in recuperative sessions organised by a mysterious character called Bemba G.<sup>35</sup> This character is an enigmatic cross between educator, magician, shaman and storyteller. Elsewhere, the author describes him as “a genie, older than anyone could say” (“Universal”). Bemba G’s strategy for restoring the humanity of these children is to engage them in storytelling sessions, the idea being that “in order to overcome their trauma, what [they] need is to impose narrative coherence” (Mackey 236). Initially, he is the one who tells them stories, keeping them rapt and attentive. The secondary part of his strategy is to get them to tell their own stories, probably hoping for a cathartic or therapeutic effect from these sessions. However, an adverse effect of the storytelling is that it actually reminds the children of their horrors, pain and loneliness, contrary to Bemba G’s intentions.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, he happens upon the rather remarkable idea of getting the children to act in a Krio adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, which importantly “provides a critical parallel for social and political realities in Sierra Leone” (Mackey 239).<sup>37</sup> Acting allows the children to engage in

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Paul Richards writes of an individual called Bemba Gogbua, “an elderly hunter (and storyteller) from a Gola Forest village on the Liberian border in 1989” (*Fighting* 87). Jarrett-Macauley appears to model Bemba G on this figure, particularly the storytelling trait.

<sup>36</sup> Bemba G’s method appears similar to the Freudian ‘talking cure,’ where talking about symptoms of an illness brings about their disappearance (Freud 184). The fact that such a method does not appear to work in this case indicates Jarrett-Macauley’s own challenge to the method with regard to the traumatised ex-child soldiers. Alcinda Honwana observes that one of the difficulties in the reintegration of ex-child soldiers into their former communities has been the fact that they are often “asked to talk about their painful memories as a way of healing. Such methods are common in Western psychological approaches [and are not successfully applicable] to a society that possesses very different ontologies and social and cultural patterns” (“Negotiating” 292). Further, “[r]ecalling traumatic experiences through verbal externalization [...] might reopen the door to malevolent forces” (Honwana, *Child Soldiers* 153). These observations mirror the argument cautioning against importing disability studies methodology wholesale into non-Western locations.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Decker’s *Juliohs Siza* has an important significance in Sierra Leone’s history. Published three years after the country’s independence in 1961, the play’s Krio language asserts “a desire for linguistic sovereignty” (Caulker 209). It serves a similar function in this context as a ‘frame narrative’. Not only can the mimicking of violence in the play be seen as a cathartic process, but its nationalist connotations also anchor the child actors in the Sierra Leonean space. In its original production, *Juliohs Siza* served as “a call to [Sierra Leoneans] to be vigilant in order that their newly won independence is safeguarded by means of a just and democratic state” (Caulker 218). The children’s re-enactment of that play in *Moses, Citizen & Me* revitalises the

narrativisation of their own experiences through identification with the militant characters of the play.

Citizen's part in this role acting enables us to closely observe the way Jarrett-Macauley attempts to bridge the gap between the ex-child soldiers and the communities from which they were torn, most of them forcefully. At first, Julia wants Citizen to take on a role where he will be required to make a speech, seeing it as an opportune moment for the child to overcome his reticence. It is her way of restoring him to 'normalcy', to rescue him from "silence [...] the prison-house whose guards are language" (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 110). However, Citizen remains reluctant to speak. In the end, he is given the role of Brutus's servant, Lucius, a performance which involves singing a Malian love song. Allison Mackey observes that Citizen's refusal to speak should be read as a suggestion of "alternative ways of working through trauma," that "perhaps it is not only a matter of telling, but also of singing, drawing, carving – all which involve a creative shaping of one's experiences" (237). I agree with her observation, especially upon noting that this role-play indeed – within Julia's imaginary world – has the effect not only of restoring a sense of humanity and dignity to the children, but also signals their acceptance and re-entry into the 'normal' world.<sup>38</sup> Through the staging of the play, they engage in 'instructing' the audience, performing creative (as opposed to their previous destructive) roles.

If Citizen is an ostracised character – a misfit – in the 'real' world, then he finds a sense of belonging within this group of children. There is a camaraderie formed from shared or similar brutal experience among them, and they recognize each other's humanity. Although they occasionally fight among themselves, they do not see each other as 'monsters'. But as in the school environment in *Zulu Love Letter*, the Gola forest here serves as an institution – albeit informal and mystical – that shields these children from the rest of the public. The forest plays the two parts of restoring the children's humanity, while at the same time keeping them temporarily from the sight of the normates. In a way, this emphasises the community's identification of the children as contaminants. In the contexts of Mozambique and Angola, for instance, people involved in war atrocities – even unwilling children – are regarded as "contaminators of the social body" (Honwana, *Child Soldiers* 6). In spite of its different geographical location, these contexts aid the reader in understanding the significance of the

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message of nation-building crucial to the war-torn nation and the actors themselves. The role of the play in this text is further expanded in the next chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Role play is regarded as one of the more successful trauma healing activities employed by psychiatrists among war affected children in Sierra Leone (Gupta and Zimmer 213; Williamson 193).

Gola forest as a space of healing for the child soldiers. It is only when they are deemed ‘cleansed’ (evident in their ability to satisfactorily stage the play) that they are presented before the rest of the world.

There is more to the Gola forest than just a safety zone for the ex-child soldiers. One study of forests in Western literature highlights three ways in which the forest is often portrayed: as being in “[contrast] to the city court, or other built environments [...], as a place of wandering or error, in which the straight path is lost,” and as “a place of safety to which the outlaw or exile can flee and in which she or he can find solace, or even delight” (Addison 119). The forest in *Moses, Citizen & Me* close resembles the last two descriptions. It is in the forest that the child soldiers lose touch with humanity, but it is also in this space that they make their way back to it. The significance of the forest is drawn in part from Paul Richards’ *Fighting for the Rainforest* (1996), a text that Jarrett-Macauley acknowledges using (227). Anne Whitehead argues that Jarrett-Macauley must have found particularly intriguing the sections where Richards suggests the forest as a tool for post-war reconstruction:

Richards notes that the RUF [...] made particular ‘strategic use’ of particular elements of forest cultural heritage [including] the practice of initiation, which marks the end of childhood in forest culture and creates bonds among peers, respect for the expertise of elders, and commitments beyond the ties of kinship [...]. Richards’ aim in elaborating the ways in which the RUF has seized upon and distorted many of the valuable resources of the forest region is to suggest that post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone could usefully reclaim forest culture from the RUF, thereby basing itself on community, indigenous knowledge rather than on military intervention or top-down humanitarian assistance. (Whitehead 253-254)

To the child soldiers, the forest is therefore simultaneously the space where they are initiated into violence as well as a possible space for rehabilitation. Jarrett-Macauley’s description of the resplendence of the Gola forest is a continuation of her close detailing of the Sierra Leone landscape, which inevitably links to the war. However, the Gola forest that exists in Julia’s imagination appears untouched by the war. In what might seem an essentialist way of conceptualising nature, the Gola forest appears untainted by mankind, hence being perfect as a site of renewal. This forest, with its “intoxicating magical order: scrupulously structured and tinged with babble, unreliable clocks and tracks” (93), is where Citizen is to begin the

healing process. This is highlighted by, among other things, the decision to bury '439K' in the forest, where it was created.<sup>39</sup>

I have repeatedly stated that the borderline between disablement and ability is blurred. Jarrett-Macauley's novel blurs that line even more through the magical realist mode. If we are to take all the events that happen in Gola forest as manifestations of Julia's mind, then they can be read as an indication of Julia's own attitude towards Citizen and other traumatised child soldiers. After all, all the events at the camp, from the storytelling to the stage acting, are formulations of Julia's mind. It is her way of trying to relive Citizen's experiences and chart a path for him back to his family. The implication of this process is that Julia creates fragments of events basing on what *might* have happened to Citizen. This imaginative process is a way of giving voice to the inarticulate traumas that he suffered. Although stepping into his shoes is a compassionate act, it has limitations in the sense that her imaginings are formed from inadequate knowledge of experiences of child soldiers, derived from "images in the newspapers and on television" (5). Nevertheless, hers is an attitude of acceptance and empathy for the child soldiers, regardless of their 'different' status in the society. The unexpected outcome of Julia's recreation of Citizen's world is that it affects her outlook towards both Citizen and Sierra Leone. By the end of *Moses, Citizen & Me* therefore, Julia too is a changed character. She moves from fearing Citizen to an empathetic appreciation of his humanity and a willingness to imagine what he has been through. In relation to the dis/ability divide, the narrator hardly thinks in terms of an 'Us/Them' dichotomy any longer. She begins to see Citizen as the young boy who simply misses his mother, and not as the monster always an inch away from committing murder. This is an indication that the interactions between normative and non-normative bodies can indeed be enabling to parties on either side of this imaginary divide.

In general, *Moses, Citizen & Me* is a narrative that succeeds in redeeming the figure of the child soldier from the stereotype of 'monstrosity'. But the novel is not without its ironies. For instance, at a certain level, one could read it as an exposition of what Clare Barker calls "poster-child" narratives (*Postcolonial Fiction* 10). This is especially so at the climax of the story. During the performance of *Juliohs Siza* by the children, we are informed that apart from a smattering of some locals, the audience is "a mixed bunch, a medley of ages, nationalities and types" including "British and American soldiers in uniform" as well as

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<sup>39</sup> This is in reference to a scar that was inscribed into Citizen's back during his time as a child-soldier. Later in the novel, he etches this numerical identity on a block of wood and buries it in the forest.

“representatives from [...] international agencies” (201) and peacekeeping troops from the UN. A German theatre director is also thrown in for good measure. The inclusion of such global figures revisits a familiar narrative that suggests salvation by the hands of Western nations, to which the child soldiers are willing to tell “their lines, the sayings, their games, their memories, their ideas” (211). In spite of her own sympathetically wrought description of the ex-child soldier, Jarrett-Macauley seems to sanction the narrative “that implicitly posits child soldiers as social and military *aberrations* that humanitarian assistance might correct” (Schultheis 32, my emphasis). At the close of the story, Julia recalls a dream in which she takes Citizen to London, which further entrenches this idea of salvation from and in the West. Once there, they “jumped into the car and headed for a café off Lavender Hill [...] had *burger with extra cheese*, followed by *apple pie*. Perfectly made with *English* apples” (226, my emphasis). The images of the food in this description further support the idea of London as the one place where Citizen can finally be happy, offering the suggestion that the narratives of the child soldiers are acceptable only outside their own societies. This incidentally mirrors the fact that “the vast majority of people that consume cultural representations of child soldiers come from [...] the global North [...]” (Mackey 171-172). Although this is a dream, it could indeed herald the fact that Citizen can only gain acceptance from outside Sierra Leone. His trip can easily become reality, since in this novel, “the veil thins between one world and another” (225). Such a dream could also simply suggest Jarrett-Macauley’s acknowledgement of the country as one which is still undergoing a process of healing. This healing is mostly in terms of attitude change, which is needed before the communities can accept ex-child soldiers. Until the society itself has healed, it would therefore be unable to contribute to the completion of the former child soldier’s recovery, who would have to be moved to a space where his past is not held against him.

In spite of some ambivalences remaining at the close of the novel, there is a subtle suggestion that the narrator succeeds, if not in ‘normalizing’ Citizen, then at least in removing (from her own field of vision) the attitude that places Citizen in a category other than human. Whether it is in London or within Sierra Leone, there is a hint at a ‘happy’ ending, where Citizen is not the “little devil” that the entire community will fear. At the end of the novel, the Citizen who endures in the reader’s mind is one who does not live in solitude, but is instead part of a society that nurtures him, even as it undergoes its own process of healing.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the two novels and one film, the chapter set out to argue for the interactions between disabled characters and the ableist world as potentially triggering not only disablement, but also enablement. Through examinations of the dis/ability zone in the creative works discussed, the analysis identifies this juncture as being a site for also challenging and complicating the construction of disablement. One of the most obvious outcomes from interactions in this space is the construction of disability, mostly through ableist attitudes. This is most evident in *Xala* and *Moses, Citizen & Me*. However, this zone also serves to destabilise the social construction of disablement, and make room for enablement. An example can be the characterisation of Simangaliso in *Zulu Love Letter*, where the deaf girl's interactions with other people – able-bodied and disabled – assist in enabling her in her society. The film here provides an apt example for texts with illocutionary force, which can “reformulate ‘values’, beliefs’, ‘self-images’, ‘boundaries’ and ‘frontiers’” (Lara, *Moral Textures* 7). Through the imagining (and rendering, through creativity) of such possibilities, texts such as these highlight transformative possibilities for both disabled characters and normates. This transformation is at an attitudinal level, and this is crucial because it is at this level that disability is socially constructed. Interactions with able-bodied others may indeed in most cases result in the construction of disability. However, as has been shown in this chapter, it is these same experiences that sometimes serve to enable the characters.

## **Chapter 4: Enabling Disability: Disability as a Socially Adaptive and Creative Condition**

“Difference demands display. Display demands difference”.

(Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 55)

### **Introduction**

One of the common trends in the representation of disability is the depiction of disabled persons as possessing special insight, manifested in the form of powers of prophecy or clairvoyance. This is particularly the case with blindness, with a connection to insight being made from as far back as the time of the ancient Greeks (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 102). My reading of the linkage between disability and creativity is precisely a challenge to this approach. Instead, I argue that through connections between disability and creativity, the writers/filmmakers variously display disability as a socially adaptive and creative condition, but not one that ‘automatically’ endows disabled persons with ‘alternative’ or ‘compensatory’ gifts or qualities. This perspective is conveyed through the multiple forms of storytelling within the texts. In other words, stories told and creative acts depicted within these texts serve an enabling function for various characters within them.

This chapter examines the way characters in the texts harness art as a way of expressing themselves or channelling their emotions, focusing on six texts discussed earlier in other chapters. The chapter argues that in the various narratives, disabled characters adapt their disablement as a state within which they can create art as self-expression and social commentary. One way of understanding this process is to regard the text as a narrative containing other narratives within it. Gérard Genette’s identification of various narrative levels is relevant in this regard. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* ([1972]1980), he observes that “[a] narrating situation [is made complex by, among other things] its relationship to other narrating situations involved in the same narrative” (215). Importantly, these second-order narratives, or metanarratives, “can be handled as nonverbal representation (most often visual)” (Genette 231). The nonverbal content is often captured through the narrator’s description. For me, this corresponds with the various modes of storytelling located in the texts at hand. The focus of the chapter allows for an examination of how the link between disability and artistic creativity serves to depict the affected character as a social being, not as an isolated figure.

In this chapter, the subject of disabled protagonists' artistic creativity is extensively examined, focusing on its representation in *Spring Will Come*, *Zulu Love Letter*, *Moses, Citizen & Me*, *Lyrics Alley*, *The Language of Me* and *Measuring Time*. This selection of texts features disabled characters employing creativity in different ways, and this chapter highlights the various functions of these alternative narrative modes within the texts. For these protagonists, the very act of narrating their story (here in artistic form) serves a crucial function, "independently of the metadiegetic content" (Genette 233). This creativity suffices to highlight agency on the part of individuals socially regarded as lacking in some dimension of physical capacity which in some African cultures is taken as a 'sign' of impaired or deficient humanity, with severe consequences for the familial or social life accessible to the disabled person. This leads to the other function that the disabled protagonists' art serves in the texts, which is that of anchoring the characters in their respective socio-cultural contexts, enabling them to transcend the isolation that characterises their respective private worlds. In this, it reflects an observation that María Pía Lara makes with regard to narratives – they "become the vehicle for the construction of collective and individual identities" (*Moral Textures* 36). In relation to the concern with the social (raised in the previous chapter), artwork is seen in these texts as offering a way for these characters to re-engage with the social world, creating possible ways of existing in these spaces. So while some of their artistic creations are directed inwards, expressing the characters' suffering, concerns and desires, these same works also speak to the outside world. Apart from serving the function of contact with other people in their environments, these forms of creativity by the disabled protagonists also reveal the artists' recognition of their location in the world and engagement with the broader world beyond their immediate personal confines.

With this approach, the reading of the creative works included or incorporated in the texts is effected by means of a particular lens, with a specific objective in mind – i.e., to establish how they act as enabling devices for their producers and for society at large. As it is presented in some of the texts, the very condition of disability acts as an impetus or a catalyst for creativity, or as "a source of embodied revelation" (Snyder and Mitchell 10). The characters in the texts find themselves in various circumstances – usually of isolation – that lead to these forms of creativity as a means of reaching out beyond and communicating across from their own social and personal locations. And it is through these chosen forms of creativity that they write, paint, sketch, or weave their way back to the wider, shared social space. Disability is therefore variously figured in these works as a condition to which the

disabled person can respond creatively – a stimulant to creativity – or as a possible instrument of social outreach; a connective device. Although it is argued by some that due to its “forbidden” nature, the subject of disability is an attractive plot-complicating feature for creative artists (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 2), in these works it functions in a somewhat different fashion. In inaugurating the need for a story to be told, it also turns the disabled character into a storyteller. There are two important observations to be emphasised in relation to this storytelling function – first, the story that is told is not only/always or exclusively that of the disability, and secondly, the storytelling mode is not always that of a linear narrative rendered through words.

Taking a slightly different form from the last three chapters, this particular chapter is structured along the ways creativity is presented in the texts. To construct the argument, the discussion dwells on the importance of William Zulu’s artistry in *Spring Will Come*, highlighting the relevance of his linocut prints to his position as a disabled black man in apartheid South Africa. Similarly, the discussion focuses on the significance of verse for the quadriplegic Nur in *Lyrics Alley*. The discussion then engages with Simangaliso in *Zulu Love Letter*, focusing on her artistic creativity as depicted in the film, and further considers the relevance of that creativity in relation to the broader social relations reflected in the film and from the social context outside it. Musa Zulu’s memoir, *The Language of Me*, is also included in order to highlight the way art serves as an avenue of self-expression for the author-narrator. The staging of *Juliohs Siza* by the child soldiers in *Moses, Citizen & Me* is then examined with particular emphasis on the relevance of this play in the reintegration of the children into the social milieu. In the same novel, I examine the way the narrator employs references to a photographic archive to accord agency to a character disenabled by war violence. Lastly, the chapter examines the way Mamo’s re-storying of history can be read as an individually and socially enabling form of agency in *Measuring Time*.

### **Art as metadiegesis in *Spring Will Come***

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the portrayal of disability in many of these texts illustrates an imagined borderline that is erected in ableist societies, separating the normates from the disabled characters. This wall is porous, and can actually be dissolved altogether, through attitudinal change, for one thing. However, as found in the texts under study, this boundary can also be breached through artistic creativity. As Lara emphasises, “stories shape our views, capturing, at the same time, the uniqueness of each being, and the equality of our

humanness” (*Moral Textures* 41). This point highlights one of the key functions of both literary and filmic representations of disablement – the destabilising of the socially constructed notion of disability as radically ‘other’.

William Zulu’s *Spring Will Come* provides an apt starting point for illustrating the enabling features of artistic creativity. The autobiography is not presented entirely in the written word. Although William’s prose narration takes up by far the greater part of the text, the various reprints of his artworks are an equally important part of the story. Art is important for the primary character in terms of career development, but also becomes a way in which the text transcends genre limits imposed by his use of the written word. The narrative also portrays art as offering a kind of therapeutic healing of this individual who initially has a very low sense of self-worth. Through art, he recognizes the value that he has as a person. This process starts with his schooling at Rorke’s Drift:

I had learnt a lot from my fellow students’ hopes and aspirations during my stay at art school. It had been among these wild-looking students that I had grown strong in body and soul. It was at Rorke’s Drift that I had learnt to be independent and had grown to know my artistic capabilities, *in spite of my disabilities*. It was there at Shiyane that I had discovered how far I could push my *afflicted* body and found healing for my *bruised* soul. Truly, Rorke’s Drift had given me much to be grateful for, for there I had found new will and a reason to *live* for another day. (135, my emphases)

This passage initiates the appreciation of artistic creativity as a form of rebirth for an individual who had given up all thought of succeeding in life. It highlights the realisation that he has reason to remain hopeful. Artistic creativity is here presented as being capable of mending his “afflicted” body and his “bruised” soul. *Spring Will Come* could fall into the category that G. Thomas Couser (2009) terms *autosomatography*. It is therefore difficult to avoid reading it as a sample of such narratives that portray characters as overcoming their disabilities, reflecting a “rhetoric of triumph”, where “the narrative takes the form of triumph over adversity” (Couser, *Signifying* 36). The phrase “in spite of [his] disability” maintains the regard of his body as an obstacle to his development. Although there is no neat ending that illustrates a cure, the memoir nevertheless ends on a positive note best embodied in the book’s hopeful title, with spring as the season of rebirth. There are about three subtly interrelated events in William Zulu’s life that illustrate this optimism. These include his wedding, his career success as a linocut artist, and the change in South Africa heralded by the release of Nelson Mandela. His artwork is at the centre of this web, as it assists in the artist’s realization of his self-worth, enabling him to build a romantic relationship. His creativity also

captures the oppressive climate of the time, as well as the hope felt in the ushering in of a new political dispensation. This chapter focuses on the aspect of artistic development, while also signalling its connection to these other aspects of the artist's environment.

William Zulu does not mince words about how he regards the disability as an impediment to his artistic development. He is unable to continue with his training at Rorke's Drift, for instance, because "[his] disability problems compelled [him] to terminate [his] studies" (135). Later, when he decides to enrol for training as an art teacher at Madadeni Training College, he is turned down on the basis of access:

[The principal] went on to say that my disability made it impossible for them to accommodate me at the college as I would not be able to reach the classrooms due to the steep steps that led up to them. Moreover, the college could not guarantee my acceptance and welfare among the able-bodied students. He was sorry he could not assist me in some other way. Shrugging his stooped shoulders, he indicated that the interview was over. (202)

Zulu here sees the disability as the "predicament that had kept [him] imprisoned in Emondlo for all these years and prohibited [his] move to one of the major cities, where [he] could have had a better chance to further [his] art" as well as the "same obstacle that had stood in the way of being able to approach someone to be the loving partner [he] so longed for in [his] life" (245). Although he initially pits the two – his artistic skill and his body – against each other as opposing parts of his being, he later comes to reverse that position. He begins to recognise his art as providing him an escape from that part of him described as "a prisoner trapped in an ailing body, which felt like a millstone, dragging [him] down into an abyss of hopelessness" (146). The example above is one of the clearest illustrations of how disablement is created through social institutions. Due to "often limited access to education and physical barriers to overcome, people with disabilities are most often severely disadvantaged on the employment market" (Ingstad and Eide 5). The inability of the college to enrol the narrator figures it as a disabling institution, which in effect is a way of denying citizenship to this particular individual.

All these descriptions highlight the problems that Zulu encounters in his society as a result of his disablement. Seen from a different perspective, these problems could be seen as stemming from the deficient infrastructure and ableist attitudes in his society. Further, they highlight the way poverty emerges as a disabling factor in the Emondlo community. From the perspective of the social model, therefore, Zulu is disabled because his community is unable to accommodate his different body.

In *Moral Textures*, María Pía Lara argues that “[n]arrative efforts [...] can permeate, erode, and transform our self-conceptions in the act of stepping into the public arena” (69). This utterance is made in relation to women’s narratives. Lara argues that “[b]y renarrating the experiences of other women’s past, women have rewoven the textures of communicative praxis into their conceptions of themselves as newly emerging moral agents” (*Moral Textures* 44-45). These observations about women’s narratives hold true for other kinds of emancipatory narrative forms. In this case, the transformative potential of the narrative also applies to narratives of disability, which “reproduce, mix, or interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the cultural norms of embodiment” (Smith and Watson 54). It is important to note, however, that it is not just the content of the narrative that is enabling. As indicated earlier, narrative enablement also manifests through the agency exercised through creativity, the formal elements of the artwork, as well as the potential for empathy contained in the creative work. There are two immediate forms of artistic creativity in William Zulu’s case – the autobiographical text and the linocut prints contained within it.

Zulu’s linocut printing is a manifestation of an alternative form of narrativising one’s story. This art form is described as follows by the author-artist: “Also known as linocut, [it is] the art of producing inked images on paper. A set of woodcutting tools is used to cut outlines on blocks of linoleum. The images are then rubbed with printing ink and imposed on a sheet of paper” (330). This form complements the story told through the written word, providing Zulu with an emotive outlet. In addition to this, one could argue that the inclusion of these art forms within the autobiographical mode entails a layering of narratives. The majority of the works reflect the artist’s social consciousness, commenting visually on the economic and political plight of black people in South Africa. One such print is entitled “Tilling the hard soil” (136), depicting a group of three women with hoes, frozen in the act of preparing the land for sowing. Prints such as these showcase the poverty that many black people experience in the country. Some of the artworks voice the artist’s political sensibility, capturing the political unrest in his country, with titles such as “Peace Now!” and “The pain of KwaZulu-Natal.” The linocut form is deliberately chosen by the artist:

The black and white print was popular among black artists since it provided a bold and accessible image, which made it an ideal choice for the ‘resistance’ images so prevalent in our country during the 1970s. In some respects, the physical labour of printmaking, as the tool is driven through the resisting material of the lino block, seemed to replicate the socio-political struggle we faced as black South Africans. (135)

One can read these artworks as reflecting William Zulu's awareness of the society around him. Therefore, the linocut print also exists as a metadiegetic narrative *à la* Genette, through which Zulu tells of some of the hardships experienced by black South Africans. The artworks on their own form a story that is at once William's as well as South Africa's, culminating in a piece entitled "Ten Years of Freedom."

The two forms – written word and linocut – work together as narratives of enablement, with the former detailing a narrative that primarily highlights the enablement of the individual, detailing his struggles and his successes. On the other hand, the linocut copies supplement this story but also provide a window to the writer-artist's environment. Related to this social function of his work, the artist describes himself in an interview as "a social and political commentator through [his] art" (Newman). Part of this stems from the teaching of an instructor at Rorke's Drift, who had "impressed upon [the students] that as black artists, [they] had a duty to [the] nation to reflect [their] socio-political situation creatively, until black people were finally free" (133). This social aspect, according to Laura Wright, is what sets *Spring Will Come* apart as a work of life writing, as it "eschew[s] more conventional understandings of 'autobiography' as an individualist, often alienating, undertaking – the act of telling the story of the self to the self and, ultimately, if that narrative is accessible enough, to others" (50). In this memoir, "writing the story of the self is also a communal activity, informed by a multitude of players added to, performed, and, in a very real sense, composed in the collective spirit that informs oral tradition" (Wright 49-50). We might argue, for instance, that this sense of community is reflected in the way the author-narrator locates his story in the history of the Zulu people, "all the way back to 1879 [...] the year that effectively marked the end of the great Zulu empire" (1). However, a more unique form of telling of the communal story is to be found in his linocut prints.

As he writes in his memory of developing his skills at Rorke's Drift, it is in art that Zulu finds "healing for [his] bruised soul". For him, art has the potential to help "inner states" (137) or could be used to project images that people would find pleasing. Particularly important here is the fact that it can serve his needs as well as those of others, being aesthetically pleasing or having social significance for a particular group of people. Eventually, he manages to blend the two, creating images of South African black people that also reflect his own sentiments. And indeed most of Zulu's artworks reflect political realities of his context. His linocut prints, populated by "heavy-limbed men and women with scowling faces and vacant stares, hemmed in by solid emptiness" (137), reflect these inner states.

It is worth looking at these artworks in closer detail in order to appreciate how they exist as metadiegetic narratives within *Spring Will Come*. On the one hand, they might be seen as complementing Zulu's written narrative. However, they trace their own narrative that at moments is at odds with the artist's personal story, depicting "rural scenes and events around [him], as well as the occasional scriptural theme" (230). As Laura Wright argues, "the linocuts that are situated throughout the last part of the narrative – like the ones that precede them – are illustrative of the pain that persists in Zulu's life and in South Africa in general" (52). For instance, a number of these images focus on the theme of unemployment, a problem which the author suffered for long time. Three of these prints, entitled "Migrant worker" (8), "Migrant worker retrenched" (39), and "Job-seekers" (200) highlight the seriousness of the unemployment problem among black people in South Africa, a problem carried over from the country's apartheid past.

"Migrant worker" depicts a man leaving his home in search of employment, with a woman and children looking on, possibly left behind to wait for provisions or money that the man will (or might) send from his place of work. This print highlights another problem that usually follows from this particular predicament – broken families. As the related print "Migrant worker retrenched" indicates, there is no assurance of stable employment in the urban centres, even if the man does find it. Jobs can be lost at any time, putting in jeopardy the relatives who depend on the migrant worker's income. William Zulu shows keen awareness of this problem through his art, and also highlights another issue often linked to migrant labour – the spread of HIV/AIDS. This is captured in three thematically related prints. In "Abandoned" (248), the artist depicts an individual rejected by friends and relatives, due to having contracted HIV. It features the victim in a posture of despair, reaching out to two individuals who are walking away. Sketched on the print are the words, "ABANDONED Only for aids". Having suffered his own measure of stigmatization, it is remarkable that William Zulu here highlights the ostracizing of another individual due to their bodily condition. The metadiegetic narrative is often related to the diegetic one through a "purely thematic relationship" (Genette 233), where the second-degree narrative reinforces a particular theme in the first order one. In this case, the theme of alienation conveyed through the "Abandoned" print mirrors the alienation that the artist feels as a disabled and unemployed black man. He here reflects a reality not only of South Africa, but of many other countries as well, where misconceptions about HIV lead to the stigmatization of infected individuals. The second print, "Searching for a cure" (256), carries a more positive, though

complex message. It features a patient lying on a mat, surrounded by several people, including a priest and a *sangoma*, who is frozen in the act of throwing bones on a mat, ostensibly to divine a cure. The rest of the people appear to be relatives depicted in various despondent postures. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the priest and the *sangoma*, who obviously have the same goal but employ different – and probably equally ineffective – paths towards it. The print highlights possible harmony between traditional and modern religious practice. In this it reflects religious beliefs of some ethnic groups in South Africa, but also echoes the author's own experiences regarding his disability. Unfortunately, the third print in the sequence, "Yes—we can" (269) casts doubt on any hopes of curing the disease. It features a group of women kneeling before a poster on which is depicted a coffin with the words, "ONE MORE DEATH. A LOSS TO THE LAND. RISE AND PREVENT HIV AND AIDS". This print obviously shifts in tone from a message of cure to one of prevention. Other prints reflect on the local politics of KwaZulu-Natal, reflecting the hope as well as the violence in the communities.

From these examples, one can appreciate the way the artist acquires a voice through his art. The collection of prints in *Spring Will Come* therefore details a narrative that reflects on the plight of disenabled black South African people, among whom he locates himself. As illustrated presently, this artistry is similar to that displayed in Simangaliso's love letter as well as the universal message of belonging communicated in the former child soldiers' performance of *Juliohs Siza*. The fact that disability is not the central message in these metadiegetic narratives is an important indicator of the artists' self-identification as part of the human community, and not exclusively as part of the disabled community. In this sense, the narratives, at both diegetic and metadiegetic levels, are enabling indicators of the diversity of humanity. As presented here, one could also say that the disabled person is figured as understanding social disablement through their disability, and this understanding contributes to an enabling process for the broader society. It also shows them, as artists, assuming roles of social leadership and prophetic insight.

#### **‘The Pencil Revolution’: art and verse in *The Language of Me***

Musa Zulu's *The Language of Me* is similar to William Zulu's *Spring Will Come* not only in the way the narratives are situated in the memoir tradition, but also in the fact that both authors are artists. Whereas William Zulu works with linocut prints, Musa Zulu's medium is pencil and paper. One can also not ignore the fact that both individuals are wheelchair users.

This similarity is deliberately evoked since it also appears as a subject in their artistic concerns.

Like William Zulu's memoir, Musa Zulu's is also in actuality a number of narratives layered together in the text. On the surface level is the prose narrative detailing events leading up to his accident, and his life after it. It is this story that the narrator presents primarily in order to "tell a story of hope and to remind the world of the power of positive thinking" (x). This prose form is complemented by poems and pencil drawings. As the writer-artist points out: "[the] selection of sketches, poems and prose reflections [...] trace my different emotional states through the many changes that I have been through and reflect different facets of the 'inner me'" (x). I focus on the first two forms as both animating a kind of enablement as well as articulating a different narrative trajectory to that which is contained in the prose. Like the other authors discussed in this chapter, Musa Zulu's creativity speaks both of the artist as well as to an imagined audience beyond the confines of the book. The discussion illustrates how artistic creativity becomes enabling through the articulation of messages that are at once private and public.

Musa Zulu's poetry contains a variety of themes, some of which are personal ones like the subject of his disability, his love for his wife, and his love of cars; and others which are directed to a broader audience, addressing universal topics of loneliness, pain and hope. The personal poems provide access to his emotional side, and are thus situated alongside the prose narrative. Taken together, however, these poems appear to address a need for restitution that the poet has, a project of self-reconstruction in which he draws on various sources in order to reassert himself as a worthy human being. One of the first poems in the book, "On The 20<sup>th</sup> Of April..." shows this dimension of personal feeling. The poem is written in remembrance of the day he was involved in the car accident that left him paralysed from the waist down. He calls it "Remembrance Day," looking back on the day with optimism, "to find the good in it and make its challenges work for [him] rather than against [him]" (ix). This outlook fits into the format of most memoirs of disability, where "the narrative takes the form of a story of triumph over adversity" (Couser, *Signifying* 33). The verse of the poem also highlights the optimism expressed by the poet, especially through the realisation that he is not an isolated individual. Therefore the language of the poem expresses the persona as one "on a journey / That not only myself but others who are many / Travel and live through its fears and pains / Hoping for a home and love on these lonely plains" (1). These lines form a powerful counter-narrative to that of alienation which is expressed in the earlier parts of the prose section of the

book. Through the poem, the poet acknowledges the fact that not only is he not alone as a disabled individual, but he has family at hand to assist him through his “journey”. These lines also draw attention to one feature for which *The Language of Me* stands out among all the other texts discussed in this thesis – optimism. Zulu’s language reflects a potent positivity that is probably responsible for his career as a public speaker. This is captured in the poem, which is at once an act of enablement as well as an expression of the enabling outlook of the speaker, regarding the way he chooses to regard “Remembrance Day”:

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April to myself I made a promise  
 To cry, heal and move on in peaceful bliss  
 To battle with the fog that hums in crazy song  
 And find the clear skies that stretch along (1)

This stanza exemplifies the optimism that runs through the entire text. The poem creates an image of disability that challenges ableist stereotypes of the disabled figure as dependent and miserable. However, in the eerie and frightening image of the “fog that hums in crazy song”, Zulu makes clear how psychologically befuddling, discouraging and terrifying the effect of the disability is. As the first poem in the book, it exemplifies Zulu’s mission in writing his memoir:

I felt compelled to write this book and share with others my ‘dark night of the soul’ – its highlights as well as its lowlights – and trace how the storms that I had gone through on my long journey back to the light had changed and reshaped me. In this way, I hoped to exorcise the ghost of ‘disability’ from the map of my life, and in its place hoist the flags of ‘ability’. (ix)

This preface does more than just prepare the reader for the book’s content. The iconography contained in this passage evokes the image of a brave adventurer battling against various obstacles (“storms,” “ghost[s]”), and emerging as the conquering victor. Zulu’s choice of images brings to mind the figure of a mountain climber conquering the highest peak and subsequently marking his success with the hoisted flag. The imagery therefore effectively highlights the way the author uses language not only to articulate his “journey” back from a place of hopelessness, but also as a means of narrative enablement, a mode through which he makes that journey.

The subject of disability also emerges in another of Zulu’s poems, “These Wheels of Steel”. The poem reflects on the sort of life the persona might have led if he had not been disabled. For instance, the persona considers the possibility that he “would be walking up and down / Running around kicking balls with the boys” (67). This is a hint at nostalgia rarely seen in the

narrative. It disrupts the optimism and *joie de vivre* that animate Zulu's writing. Thus it is not surprising to see the speaker countering this nostalgic train of thought with the firm assertion that he still enjoys life to the fullest on his wheelchair:

...on these wheels of steel I do move up and down  
 Sitting around and talking about the stories of peace and love  
 Doing things that lovers do – the things that you and I do  
 On these wheels of steel I still do jump up and down  
 Happy with the memories of having been a boy and now a man (67)

The subject of the poem is the poet's wheelchair, and it shows his shift in attitude towards the device, from being an object he "hated [...] with all [his] heart" (22) to something he accepts as a part of him: "I discovered in a moment of reflection that I had actually grown fond of the 'object' and come to accept and cherish its presence and meaning over the years of my disability. I love my 'wheels of steel'; they define me, they tell my story and carry my message" (65). The poem is therefore one that illustrates the persona's embracing of his fate, and the recognition and expression of his humanity. Apart from that, however, the subject matter of the poem helpfully indicates how infrastructural support (in the form of the wheelchair) assists in the transforming of disability into a socially adaptive condition, expressed here through verse. The poem therefore speaks to that broader project of restitution captured in the acceptance of the wheelchair as a part of the speaker.

The rest of Zulu's poems are not on the topic of disability, but rather embody a sense of pride that highlights the poet's acknowledgement of his cultural identity. This is another similarity he has with William Zulu. The two artists reflect the point that "the narrating body is situated at a nexus of language, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other specificities" (Smith and Watson 38).<sup>40</sup> It is these influences that bring heteroglossia into the work of literature, enriching it as literary language "stratified into [a diversity of] languages (generic, period-bound and others)" (Bakhtin 272). Through their work, both artists display an awareness of their place in the world around them, while also recognizing their position in their nation's history as well as the plight of others around them. Such assertions of belonging, of reflection on their cultures, are part of what gives their work appeal to other people. This is part of what accords these texts additional merit – the subject matter is not restricted to disablement. Instead, through these alternative storytelling modes, the writers also address other issues affecting them in their societies. Two examples from Musa Zulu's poetry highlight this point.

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<sup>40</sup> This citation is from Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's first edition of *Reading Autobiography* (2001). The statement is omitted from the more recent, second edition (2010).

In “Zulu,” the poet sets out not only to speak of himself as “a proud descendant of the house of Zulu,” but also to correct “the stereotypical image that has come to be accorded to [his] people – ‘aggressive’, ‘war-mongers’, ‘uncultured’” (105). The subject matter of the poem mirrors the cultural consciousness that William Zulu displays in tracing his Zulu ancestry in the opening pages of *Spring Will Come*. Both artists here display a trend that James Olney sees as unique to African autobiographies. The artists evoke “the ancestral-dependant motive [as] something that points to an entirely un-Western relationship between the individual and his past” (28). Musa Zulu here takes a slightly different perspective, attempting through the verse to assert the multifaceted nature of the Zulu person, drawing attention to attributes that are rarely part of the stereotyped image, but which are nonetheless features that create pride. For instance, the poet evokes the image of the Zulu man as a nurturing masculine figure:

His master plan revolves around family  
 A Zulu shares his soul with those around him  
 This is the wood that fuels his fires  
 The winds of change only see his flame burning higher  
 For his sense of togetherness is the bolts of his culture. (107)

For Musa Zulu, telling the story of his culture is one way of countering stereotypes that emerge when other people tell it. This is an aspect that reappears in the poem “I am What I am!” which is a highly optimistic image of the African subject. The poem is written “in the context of [the poet’s] personal struggle and in the spirit of the African Renaissance” (109). Through this poem, Zulu expresses the overlaps he sees between “freedom fights of disability and blackness” (109) – a vivid image that indicates the way racism and ableism can entrap the person, if one allows these prejudices to have such an effect on one’s sense of self-worth. One of the themes of this poem is that of pride in being an African, suggesting black people’s resilience and ability to rise from slavery and colonisation. The figure in his poem is an African [subsequently] “broken,” “rising” and “proud”, a majestic figure couched in romantic metaphors of the wilderness of the continent. This poem also speaks to the poet’s awareness of his place in the world. It is through images such as these that the African life narrative form “implies by its nature and displays in its performance a communality of existence that is unknown in the Western world” (Olney 57). Like “Zulu”, this poem also indicates a profound awareness of the poet’s place in history, which consequently emphasises this spirit of communality.

The other dimension of Musa Zulu’s art is displayed in his sketches. For Zulu, “drawing is more than a passion – it is what [he does] to find and define [himself]” (72). Like the poetry,

the sketches also tap into his affective side: “My drawings do not only give the facts of the story, but the emotions associated with the events” (72). The content of his sketches is as varied as that of his poetry (and at times complementary to it). However, there are several recurring images, including feathers (and birds), roses, leaves and swirling curtains – symbolic images that hold special significance for the artist. Other common images are of cars and women. Similarly to the way Nur’s poetry works for him (in *Lyrics Alley*), the process of drawing is where Zulu “[finds] peace of mind and ‘a quiet time’ to communicate with [his] inner voices” (78). A few of these sketches touch on the subject of disability. The tone of the drawings is noticeably positive, continuing the process of restitution that informs both the greater prose project and the verse. For instance, a sketch entitled “I am a Man” depicts the figure of a man from the waist upwards. This sketch “epitomises [the artist’s] struggle to win back ‘the soul’ and reclaim [his] pride in being a man” (109) after the accident. Importantly, the exclusion of the lower half of the body, including the penis, could be the artist’s way of contesting its primacy as the “master-signifier” of masculinity.

Contrary to what the title suggests, in between the covers of *The Language of Me* lies not a single language, but a variety of languages, expressed through the modes of prose, poetry and drawing.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it is proper to say that together, all these forms constitute what may be called the writer-artist’s language. Although these utterances serve the needs of the writer-artist, they also highlight the existence of a variegated audience. After all, as Bakhtin tells us, any utterance is made with the awareness of an audience in mind: “[a]ll rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer” (280). In Zulu’s case, his creativity does not only speak to this own soul, or to disabled people, but is also a language that resonates with and addresses other people outside the text. This potential for a single work of art to capture the voices of many is equally well presented through the poetry composed by Nur Abuzeid in *Lyrics Alley*.

### **Voicing presence through song: *Lyrics Alley***

The title of the novel *Lyrics Alley* already hints at the centrality of words and poetry to the narrative at its centre. Although the significance of words is suggested at the beginning of the story, it only becomes fully evident when Nur is disabled through a diving accident. Words of

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<sup>41</sup> Musa Zulu’s motivational speeches, which are not included in *The Language of Me*, could also be included in this list of special ‘languages’ used by the writer.

poetry (and later, song) are important in the story as they become the only way of articulating certain themes that are otherwise difficult to express in the novel's conservative setting.

A useful way of reading the function of artistic creativity in *Lyrics Alley* is to focus on binary opposites that affect all of the main characters in the story. These binary oppositions are manifested in almost all key features of the novel, from the setting to the characters. For instance, the historical setting of the novel oscillates between Sudan, characterised by tradition, and Egypt, portrayed as the hub of modernity. This difference extends to the characters of Waheeba and Nabila, pictured as representing illiteracy and literacy respectively. The character of Nur is modelled on that of the author's uncle, who suffered a similar accident. In her disabled uncle, Aboulela saw "a metaphor for 1950s Sudan. It had stood, like an excited teenager, at the cusp of independence (in 1956) from its colonial rulers, brimming with hope, before its nosedive into a terrible, unforeseen national paralysis" (Akbar). With his poetry, Nur appears at the centre of these opposing sides. As the author points out in an interview "Nur (in Arabic the name means 'light') [is] the sun around which many other imaginary characters [orbit]" (Musiitwa). Besides the point that every key character in the novel is affected in some fashion by Nur's accident, Nur himself discovers in his poetry a way of challenging certain orthodox ideologies. It is important here that artistic creativity is recognised not merely as a way of giving the disabled character a voice, but more significantly, presenting a code for challenging traditionally restricting forms of expression. Furthermore, verse as artistic creativity becomes a way of expressing emotion. Transformed into song, Nur's verse becomes an expression of love, captured in a message whose true meaning is clear only to a few individuals. Lastly, Nur's verse is a political cry that echoes through the hearts of many more people in Sudan, expressing the patriotic sensibility and worries that are felt by many people in the land. In this sense, Aboulela's use of poetry is an enabling device for the disabled character, the voice of the nation, and indeed the language of humanity.

Nur's love for poetry is displayed at the beginning of the novel, as he expresses his admiration for the poet Abdallah Muhammad Zein. The poem that he finds particularly impressive is entitled "I am Umdurman". For Nur, this poem is powerful because it appears as a novel way of expressing the "self-determination and independence" (12) that are current topics in Sudan of the 1950s, in the months leading up to the cessation of British rule. The words of the song express the poet's love for his land:

*I am Umdurman. I am the pearl that adorns my land. I am the one who nurtured you, and for you, my son, will ransom myself. I am Umdurman, the Nile watered me and sought my side. I am the one on the western bank and Gordon's head was my dowry. I am Umdurman, I am this nation. I am your tongue and your oasis...* (12, italics in original)

It is a poem that expresses the patriotism that is felt by a lot of Sudanese citizens at the time of the story. Particularly interesting is the reference to the British General Charles George Gordon, who was decapitated by Mahdist rebels during the siege of Khartoum in 1885. His head was sent to the Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad, who had made his headquarters in Umdurman (Walkley 78). This historical reference mirrors the political context of *Lyrics Alley*. However, the poem also highlights the universal language of poetry, something Nur captures in his own work in the later stages of the novel. The poet's recitation captures and fuels popular sentiment. Such is the excitement that Nur feels that he copies the words of the poem and memorises it. The style of this poem foreshadows his own "Travel is the Cause," which features later in the novel.

The main obstacle to poetic creativity in the novel comes in the form of the patriarchal leaders of the Abuzeid family. They are firmly against Nur's poetic efforts. For instance, "when he sang at a wedding outside the family, the wrath of his elders descended upon him. He was shaming the Abuzeid family, they said, standing in front of strangers like a common singer" (13). His worst moment of shame occurs when a romantic poem that he wrote as a boy is discovered. It is "[a] poem of love and longing, of lovers separated by place" (35). To his mother, however, poetry is nothing but "jingles and silly words" and "shameful things" (36). Nur's father, on the other hand, regards his son's love for poetry as "a phase he would get over" (42). Before the accident, even Nur himself is accepting of his fate: "I am not going to become a poet, so there is no point in wasting my time on it. Every family has a vocation. We are traders, not scholars or army men" (76). This is a fate that is changed by the disability. Through the character of Nur, therefore, "Aboulela [makes] a case for poetry both within her fictional world in *Lyrics Alley* and the very Sudanese society, which shuns [his] secular and at times romantic poetry" (Mabura 9). Rather than dwell on the way his disability undermines claims to hegemonic masculinity, Nur embraces poetry, which, as earlier observed, is in this society regarded as an effeminate occupation. This is a crucial move which brings about transformation for both this character as well as others. Further, although the art of poetry is largely scorned by Nur's elders as a shameful activity, Zein's "I am Umdurman" (as one of the main inspirations for Nur's own verse) is heavily laden with

militaristic and patriotic language, which speaks mainly to the men in Sudanese society. Nur's elders conveniently ignore the force that poetry carries for other members of their society, a point they come to appreciate with time. Through these poems, the novel thus carries as one of its aims highlighting the enabling potential of poetic language for effecting personal and social healing as well as agency.

Primarily, Nur's poetry achieves its enabling role through its function as a private mode of communication. Beyond the sentimental content of the verses, the reader realises that the poetry serves as a way of uniting the star-crossed lovers, Nur and Soraya. On the surface, Nur's poetry consists of "odes to his beloved Soraya or painful exposés of his paralysis and eventual loss of Soraya" (Mabura 9). His first poem, "Travel is the Cause", is a prime example of how the poet expresses both his anguish at his disablement, as well as his love for Soraya. As he puts it later in the novel, "his yearning for Soraya [...] has a shape" (221) in the form of his verse. Into the words of the poem, he can pour all his longing for her, which in this case appears to be especially fuelled by his father's cancelling of the marriage plans between the two of them. It is intensely emotional since it conveys the yearning for something he can never have. When Soraya hears the poem (transformed into song) for the first time, she is emotionally affected, bursting into tears upon hearing "lyrics telling a story that was intimate and completely theirs, describing feelings none of them had ever imagined would be made public" (242). However she soon realizes that in the private space of Nur's lyrics, she can become "intimate with him, in his deep, other world, caught in the pendulum of his thoughts, surrounded by the crystals of his dreams" (246). Another of his poems sung on the radio has even bolder content: "*Her ripe cheeks, her gentle lips. Your beauty keeps me up all night [...] I want to be alone with you*" (253). Such emotionally overt messages go against the conservative nature of the older members of the Umdurman community. But it is in this fashion that the poetry becomes enabling, through its challenge to restrictive tradition, and its celebration of love. The success of art in this case can be seen in the public disapproval when Nur's father has "Travel is the Cause" temporarily banned from Radio Umdurman, until he is forced to reverse his decision.

Surprisingly, much as Nur's poetic endeavours are frowned upon by the Abuzeid patriarchy, the world of literature is not one that females can enter. It is through Nur's reciting of poetry therefore that Soraya has access to "the outside world, the world that was not for girls" (12). The antagonism towards poetry and music indicates the dominance of a particular kind of patriarchal order, where the expression of romantic sentiment in verse and the education of

females are not encouraged. For Soraya, therefore, the poetry serves as yet another form of narrative enablement, through its enabling of participation (albeit brief and momentary) in the public, patriarchal world.

Like William Zulu's art in *Spring Will Come*, poetry in *Lyrics Alley* becomes a medium through which the artist gains an audience beyond his immediate confines. In the novel, the ownership of the poetry is a contestable phenomenon, which further enriches its significance. After all, how can we limit its ownership to Nur alone when the poetry becomes expressive of, resonates with, and is appropriated by other people in his community, and indeed the country? This is most explicitly seen in the musician Hamza Al-Naggar's unsolicited decision to use Nur's poem as the lyrics for his song, as well as the fact that Nur relies on his young cousin Zaki for the transfer of the verse to paper. In the privacy of his mind, the lines are Nur's, but when sung on the radio airwaves, reaching out to all of Sudan, the verse is no longer Nur's voice alone. Regarded in this way, it is possible to appreciate the way poetry is presented in *Lyrics Alley* as a way of potentially bridging some of the binary divides earlier alluded to. For instance, the initial hostility towards Nur's poetry (by the adult members of his family) also mirrors the conflict existing in the Abuzeid family between the two wives, Waheeba and Nabilah. As their husband realises, the two women "belong to different sides of the saraya, to different sides of him [...] two worlds [...]" (43). The former is illiterate and conservative. To her, the expression of emotions in poetry is a shameful thing that should not be encouraged. Furthermore, she regards Nur's disability as the result of "the evil eye" (112) and "black magic" (113), a curse which can only be lifted by exceptional faqirs in Umdurman. Nabilah, on the other hand, holds that "it was civilised and modern to allow young people to express their feelings through poetry, music or art" (37). In a way, the very language of Nur's poetry mediates between these two spaces. The language that he chooses for the poem links back to the fusing of the opposing forces that constantly surround him. The verse is a "mix of Sudanese colloquial and classic Arabic, a fusion of formal language and common everyday words [...]. The words are from inside him, his flesh and blood, his own peculiar situation" (221). His "lyric talent – which shapes the novel's trajectory – is a *trait d'union*, a cultural negotiation between a Sudanese existence, essentially primitive and exotic, and a European-Egyptian one, artistically sensitive and elegant, cultivated and civilised" (Rizzo 177). The formal qualities of the poem as well as its subject matter thus hint towards a possible co-existence of the two worlds.

Music, poetry and film are constantly intertwined in the novel, all treated as forms of artistic expression. The most obvious use of Nur's poetry, seen in the later parts of the novel, is to create a space, almost a separate world, where he can express himself. Earlier in the novel, Soraya realizes just how private this space is: "There were corners in him that she didn't have access to. The part of him that wrote the poems, his masculinity, and a purity she did not share" (73). It is from this private space that he draws the "ingredients and fuel" for his verse, where he can "bunch up his grievances, sculpt them and hone them for his poems" (260-261). Song is one of his earliest anchors in the days following his disablement. While in the hospital in London, awaiting surgery, he sings Sudanese songs to entertain a fellow patient, but soon "gets carried away, enjoying the sound of the Arabic words and the simple sadness of the melodies" (118). Like Musa Zulu in *The Language of Me* and Mamo in *Measuring Time*, Nur finds in lyrics a form of solace that the hospitals do not provide. And when the operation to restore functionality to his limbs fails, Nur's greatest grief is not that he will never walk again, but that he will not be able to hold a pen or turn the pages of a book (112). This is, above all, an expression of the centrality of reading and writing to him.

However, assisted by the young Zaki, Nur eventually rediscovers the joy of reading: "he reads, and there is a reason not to die" (169). This revived liveliness brings relief to his relatives, who had been perplexed by Nur's depression:

When he reads, he floats in a current of thoughts and images; he swims as if he is moving his arms and legs. This is a kind of movement, this is a momentum, a building up, starting, strolling, wandering, exploring. He is blessed with literacy. Something has not been taken away from him [...]. The words on the page are like a breath that muffles his thoughts, tousles his sentiments, plays havoc with the arguments in his head. The words on the page are a mirror. They reflect his secrets and his beauty. He is more than an invalid; he is more than a tragedy.

He is Nur Abuzeid and he is reading again. (169)

This passage powerfully and movingly captures the reawakening of Nur's self-worth. For him to rediscover himself as Nur Abuzeid, and to shrug off the label of "invalid" that is conferred upon him by the ableist public, he needs literature, similar to the way Musa Zulu uses his creativity as a space for self-reconstruction. Aboulela here highlights the imaginative force of the words on the page, and compares them to the sensation of movement. Even though this passage shows the importance of literature to Nur as a disabled character, it also draws attention to the ability of the narrative to transport the reader, to tap into the reader's most affectively responsive faculties, making him or her see things in a new light. By

reading, Nur rediscovers his own creativity. He discovers that in poetry he can pour out many of his inner feelings, taking advantage of the multiple meanings that can be housed in verse:

He had been feeling sorry for himself, the tears rolling into his ears in the most irritating way, and then down to wet his hair. There is no need at this time of night to hold them back or blink them away. But when the poem comes out of him, they stop of their own accord. They dry up and do not leave a mark. (221)

His poetry is yet another voice among the many voices that populate the novel. It allows Nur to speak a language unlike that of the other characters, unique in its semantic richness and individuality: “The words lure him and pull him along. The poem is his home – *In you, Egypt, are the causes of my injury* – his own space, and no one else’s, his own pain and no one else’s. He belongs within its lines. This is his shelter, adorned and unadorned” (232-233). This is a magic that Nur knew of even before the accident, through the poetry that he shared with Soraya. As a disabled character, he rediscovers this magic, and is able to link it to his own situation as a person on the brink of losing all hope.

“Travel is the Cause” gains Nur a national audience, and is eventually appropriated as a political slogan, which gives it a broader significance and audience than the author initially intended. In its original conception, the poem starts as a private expression of love and despair. However, when the song is quoted by a student political grouping, it becomes a form of narrative enablement as part of the rhetoric of Sudanese agitation against Anglo-Egyptian political influence. At the time of the narrative, the 1950s, Egypt is seeking to absorb Sudan under the Egyptian monarchy, a move fiercely resisted by the Sudanese. When Soraya hears the song cited by a student politician, she realises another enabling dimension of the verses: “These people didn’t know that Nur was an invalid. For them, all that mattered were his words” (245). The line “*In you Egypt is the cause of my troubles*” (244) from the poem acquires a novel meaning when uttered in this political context. It embodies the desire for independence by the Sudanese, a need to break free from Anglo-Egyptian rule. Remarkably, the narrative comes full-circle with this development. The widespread adoption of the poem as an anthem of patriotism echoes the militant “I am Umdurman” which inspired it, while simultaneously challenging the ‘effeminacy’ that others ascribed to Nur’s literary efforts. Aboulela deliberately draws attention to the way Nur’s verses acquire a life of their own, transcending the subject of individual, physical disability that originally bound them to their creator to address, and to challenge, political disenablement.

*Lyrics Alley* can be read from a variety of perspectives, since it touches on a number of themes. The enabling nature of the word (the “lyrics” in the title) is one of the main subjects, and as illustrated above, this enablement takes a variety of guises. Although the poems are hardly presented in full, they suggest an alternative narrative that not only embellishes the main story, but also adds a necessary counter-story to it. It is through poetry that Nur challenges the silencing of the disabled body, it is through poetry that the language of love overcomes silencing and finds a welcome audience, and it is through the same poetry that political sensibilities are expressed.

### **A tapestry of hope: *Zulu Love Letter***

*Zulu Love Letter* also has the telling of one’s story as a central objective. This is a theme that is relevant to both Thandeka and Simangaliso, the main protagonists in the film. The most important lesson drawn from this narrative is that the telling of stories is not only dependent on words. This film challenges the hegemony of both the spoken and the written word, offering an alternative form of conveying narrative that is even more powerful in its very resistance to narrow forms of storytelling. It is in this sense that *Zulu Love Letter* becomes an unforgettable story of enablement, especially at the social level. This is particularly significant because the message of the “love letter” is not limited to Simangaliso’s immediate family alone. It is a message that has resonance for the greater South African people.

In *Black African Cinema* (1994), Nwachuku Frank Ukadike observes that “[i]n black Africa, where many ethnic subcultures coexist, filmic representation is replete with numerous cultural symbols” (12). To fully apprehend the meaning of the narrative, therefore, he recommends an intertextual approach, which enables recognition of the significance of these cultural images to the larger film project. *Zulu Love Letter* is an apt illustration of this point. Traditionally, the love letter is a beadwork necklace, also called *incuwadi yothando* by the Zulu. The love letter that Simangaliso works on in the film is, however, “her modern interpretation of this traditional art form” (*California Newsreel*), which is appropriate given the greater significance that it carries. In the end, it is a message with significance for her family as well as the oppressed South African people. The name is derived from the observation that the beadwork traditionally served as a means of communication among the illiterate Swazi, Xhosa and Zulu people: “[c]ourting letters are expressed in bead-work [...]. The system of reading these love letters was based on the principle that symbols represent words, and words ideas. Sometimes beads stand for letters, threads of beads for words, then

the pattern would stand for a sentence, a complete thought” (Twala 115). The traditional use of the letter was for women to send messages to men, who in most cases would have moved away to seek employment in the urban centres (Boram-Hays 45). The letter would thus bridge the distance between the two lovers. Although it takes up a deeper significance in the film, the beadwork retains that essential bridging function: linking past and present traumatic histories, connecting different generations, as well as creating ties between families.

In exploring the significance of the artistic creativity in *Zulu Love Letter*, Simangaliso is a suitable subject since she is the main ‘creator’ in the film. However, much as she is a complex character on her own, she also exists as an opposite to her mother, particularly regarding the subject of storytelling. Thandeka struggles against telling her own story, as seen in the writer’s block she suffers from as well as her reluctance to testify before the TRC. In contrast, Simangaliso’s role is to be the storyteller, or in this particular narrative, a kind of ‘story-weaver,’ piecing together stories of different individuals to come up with a work of art that is simultaneously her own story and that of her community. Her love for stories is something her grandmother recognises, as seen in one scene where she tells Simangaliso a tale involving the jackal and the crow (Peterson and Suleman 76). It is also evident in Simangaliso’s curiosity regarding her mother’s work. Her vivid imagination is manifested early in the film. The image of drooping flowers in her mother’s hospital ward, a recreation from Simangaliso’s mind, hints at that creativity. In this moment, it signifies the young girl’s state of mind. It is the first instance where the film disturbs the hegemony of the voice as a communicative device. Another example of her imaginative creativity is in the paintings that are shown to Thandeka. Described by the school principal as being “full of anguish and [...] disconcerting” (Peterson and Suleman 49), these paintings nevertheless provide insight into the thoughts of the young girl. One of the paintings, for instance, features a man with a gun, signalling the child’s awareness of the violence that is a part of her world. Besides reflecting her state of mind, both of these scenes are examples of communication devices simultaneously employed by Simangaliso and the filmmakers. They provide unvoiced but emotionally potent ways of conveying internal feelings.

This avoidance of direct narration is even more powerfully evoked through the bead project, which is the main metadiegetic narrative in the film. The love letter is an effective tool of enablement because it has relevance for both Simangaliso as well as other characters in the film. Beyond that, its form mirrors that of the film, being constituted from diverse elements that all contribute to a unified and *unifying* whole. The first time the love letter is featured on

screen, Simangaliso is making a classroom presentation to her classmates. The caption on the screen reads: “Why did his parents abandon him? Why?” (Peterson and Suleman 48), indicating that one of the topics contained within the beadwork is that of abandonment. It echoes Simangaliso’s own history – she was raised by her grandparents, paralleling the anonymous subject of her presentation. This is actually a theme that is central to the entire film. The love letter, in its development as well as its structure, lays emphasis on familial ties. In relation to her disability, the love letter is an extension of Simangaliso’s wish to narrativise. In fact, as the principal points out, creative works constitute one of the ways in which students are able to communicate or express themselves. In the previous chapter, the school is discussed as a space of enablement for Simangaliso, in the way it fosters interaction among the students and destabilises feelings of dis(en)ablement. This role is here extended through its position as the source of these art projects. The painting and the love letter become so much more, “[allowing] her to convey the feelings that she had not been able to express otherwise” (Kruger 148). The painting, for instance, strengthens the suggestion that Simangaliso shares in her mother’s trauma. The violence contained in it could easily be a reflection on the violence of apartheid, including the beating of her pregnant mother that is implicitly blamed for Simangaliso’s disability.

The beadwork is an item that emphasises the role of the family as an enabling space. This is evident from the way the film portrays the Simangaliso-MaKhumalo bond as strengthened through the creative process. The older woman supports the young girl’s project and encourages her by reminding her of the significance of the various hues of the beads. More significantly, she teaches the young girl the connection between such creativity and the bonds of the family, while displaying her own collection of bead necklaces. As a way of further emphasising the importance of family bonds, she gives Simangaliso one of the necklaces. For MaKhumalo, this necklace is a reminder of her bond with her husband. Giving the bead necklace to her granddaughter is therefore a way of extending that bond. These beads, which eventually find their way into Simangaliso’s project, also serve as a joining of two generations. Simangaliso’s fusing of this necklace into her own work broadens the scope of the story that is contained within her own love letter, but also makes it a fusion of the past and the present. Resembling the form of Nur’s poetry in *Lyrics Alley*, Simangaliso’s project is a blend of the traditional and the modern, “incorporating found objects, beads, photographs, threads, ribbons and her own handwritten or drawn messages for her mother, father and grandparents” (Maingard, “Love” 7). In addition, the love letter eventually includes

photographs of members of Simangaliso's family, adding emphasis to the central message of unity and belonging. Such is the symbolic authority of this piece of artwork that when Simangaliso is involved in a car accident and Thandeka finds some beads scattered on the accident scene, she can barely contain herself. It is obviously the concern for her child that nearly drives her insane with anger, but for the viewer these beads, separated as it were from the neat pattern of the love letter, represent a threat of chaos to a life that was just beginning to develop some sense of order. Strewn across the tarmac, the beads represent a disruption to the unity signified by the love letter, a piece of work that has obviously taken considerable time (and the combined efforts of three women) to construct. In itself the composition of the love letter in this film signals a crossing of boundaries of communication as well as history. It weaves a message significant beyond the confines of this film alone.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the relationship between Simangaliso and Thandeka is a troubled one, for a number of reasons. One of these is the way the two characters struggle to communicate with each other, and not just because of Simangaliso's deafness. The communicative difficulties between the two of them are worsened by Thandeka's reticence regarding the torture she underwent while in detention under the apartheid government. With this background, Simangaliso's beadwork, which begins as a school project, gains wider relevance not only as a communicative gesture but as an attempt to bridge this gap between herself and her mother. As the film progresses, we see that indeed the bead project is not Simangaliso's alone, but also involves the other generations. There is a short but powerful set of shots that convey this idea, scenes that show the women silently working on the love letter, each contributing her own set of beads that are ultimately destined to be part of one whole. One of these scenes is described as being suffused with "an air of serenity, beauty and regeneration" as "[t]he hands of the three generations of the Khumalo family silently weave beads into Mangi's bead project" (Peterson and Suleman 90). In this short scene, which is not interrupted by any form of speech, the viewer realises the unifying message conveyed by this work of art. As Marie Kruger observes, "[t]hese calm, collaborative moments collide with a world in which communication, even between mother and child, often breaks down, and in which the loss one has suffered in the past intensifies through the politically motivated violence of the present" (148). It is a scene that contrasts sharply with the earlier one, where Thandeka argued with her parents. In contrast, this moment erases any suggestion of hostilities among the three females, and instead unites them in the therapeutic process of story-weaving.

Once one thinks of the symbolic possibilities of this piece of art, the choice of the title takes on greater significance, especially considering that the love letter hardly features at all in the one and a half hours running time. This is because, for the filmmakers, Simangaliso's love letter is not addressed just to her mother alone. In the light of the TRC context, one could argue that the film itself is but a part of a broader love letter. This is a position implied by one of the creative minds behind the film, who opines that "Simangaliso's 'love letter' encapsulates the therapeutic role of the arts and their capacity to foster love and healing through memory-work. The film, as a product, is an extension of this idea" (Peterson, "Writer's Statement" 24). Memory and healing are indeed crucial thematic components in the film, especially in relation to Thandeka.

It is Simangaliso's imaginative potential, however, which is central to the recovery of memory, and the possibility of social healing. According to Ato Quayson, "the presence of disabled people in post-colonial writing [...] marks the sense of a major problematic, which is nothing less than the difficult encounter with history itself" ("Looking Awry" 228). This emphasis on history highlights the way that Simangaliso's disability and imaginative power, manifested through her visions and dreams, are ways of building bridges not only across generations, but also connecting traumatic histories (past, present, and future). She embodies Bhekizizwe Peterson's point that "You cannot move forward from a position of amnesia" (McCluskey 168). Through her visions and nightmares therefore, Simangaliso's imagination serves the purpose of "[carrying] the past into the present" (McCluskey 168), allowing her to retrieve, and participate in, her mother's silence-inducing traumas. Taken together with the beadwork, it becomes clear that her imagination serves not only to link these generations through their contribution to the love letter, but also paves the way for the possible articulation and addressing of apartheid trauma beyond the speech-dependent TRC process.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The speech dependency of the Truth and Reconciliation platform was clearly evoked through the testimony of Mrs Konile, whose narrative most people could not comprehend. Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele discuss this particular testimony in *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (2009). After deeper readings, discussions and an interview with Mrs Konile, the authors realize that in her testimony, "Mrs Konile was not only narrating coherently within particular frameworks, but was also resisting other frameworks from being imposed on her" (Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 46). In its evoking of dreams and resistance to a single temporal frame, hers was a narrative that challenged the conventions of the TRC setup. It "defied all the elements that render narratives 'audible' within [...] the dominant discursive framework operative at the hearings" (Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 46). This resistance to dominant frameworks is what paves room for alternative modes of narrating, and it is what *Zulu Love Letter* achieves in part. In a separate book chapter, Nthabiseng Motsemme and Kopano Ratele argue that women's testimony in the TRC did not often follow the linear narrative form expected by the commissioners. Instead, their stories were "full of gaps, of silence, of gesture rather than word, of 'uhms' and headshaking and nods and uninterpretable tears" (Motsemme and Ratele 316). These testimonies showcase "the importance of

Given that the love letter is made up of various colours and patterns, *Zulu Love Letter* occupies a position adjacent to other South African films in a broad tapestry that, through unearthing the past, reveals the complexities inherent in a simplistic forgetting of the past. It is part of a discourse that critiques the rhetoric of ‘moving on’ without due recognition of the past. As Achille Mbembe puts it, in discussing post-apartheid South Africa, “nothing can be reinvented unless one is capable of both glancing backward and of looking forward” (“Postcolonial Thinking” 8). The variegated appearance of the beadwork in the film suggests interlacing of themes, including those of reconciliation, retribution, anger, forgiveness, as well as hope. There is no simple way of fusing all of these themes. The film is therefore part of a letter made up of the broader literary landscape of the country, narratives which engage in a necessary unearthing of a disabling history (symbolically suggested by the identification of the burial site of anti-apartheid activists at the end of the film). In its focus on female characters, at least, the film fits in with the description that in modern times, beadwork is “something that *enables* all women [...] to make statements about the fact that they belong to an imaginary, contested African community” (Nettleton 3, my emphasis). In this way, the love letter in the film not only signifies Simangaliso’s rejection of the role of misfit, but also functions (at a symbolic level) as a unifying factor for the other women, families, and potentially for the nation. On this level, both the film and the love letter in it reflect what María Pía Lara describes as “narratives [that] tend to offer some kind of unifying action that, through a historical connection between past and future, gives meaning to our lives” (*Moral Textures* 35). Significantly, the love letter bridges gaps across generations (represented by Simangaliso, Thandeka and MaKhumalo), histories, as well as families (the Khumalos and Me’Tau’s family) – gaps and fissures caused by the unbearable pressures of apartheid on black families and its disabling force. The film’s narrative style, which makes use of flashbacks, visions and dreams, mirrors the love letter, with its featuring of tokens from the past as well as the present. What we have at the end is therefore a product that draws on the past in order to have a firmer anchoring in the present. However, there are other embodiments of the past, in the characters of Dineo’s killers. The fact that they are still largely unrepentant (with the exception of Dlamini) highlights the necessity of evoking the past, rather than merely forgetting it and moving on.

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silences, or rather the dilemmas in interpreting silence so obviously full of meaning” (Motsemme and Ratele 316).

To continue an argument made earlier, in a deliberate upsetting of what can be seen as the ableist norm, the film places the deaf character as the one who is willing to tell her story, unlike the adult (Thandeka) who is tongue-tied about the one experience that, if articulated, would give her and Me'Tau some peace and enable them to move on with their lives. Eventually, the love letter symbolically captures the stories not only of Thandeka and Me'Tau, but significantly of Dineo as well. The film actually closes with the love letter having been dedicated to Dineo's memory. We could also place MaKhumalo's story within the same project, given that she is the one who teaches the young girl the significance of the different colours of the beads. This is further evidence that it is Simangaliso who emerges as the binding force across the various generations featured in the film. In essence, through the love letter, she gives this group of women – and indeed her immediate community – a voice through which to express their pain, and consequently find some form of closure, overcoming the disabling effects of apartheid-induced trauma to some extent through ritual reconnections that are culturally and ethically powerful and enduring. Laying it as a wreath at Dineo's shrine is not only a tribute to this particular young girl's demise, but rather to a chapter in the broader dark history of South Africa.

In *Zulu Love Letter* therefore, the link between art and disability is seen in the fact that the disabled character employs creativity as a way of both communicating emotions, retrieving traumatic history, as well as highlighting cohesion among members of her community. Significantly therefore, the love letter is both a social message and a personal one. The film remarkably draws upon a local epistemic archive, employing an indigenous art form to engage with contemporary traumas. From this observation, creativity can be regarded as a tool that inaugurates a process of healing from the trauma of the past for individuals as well as their communities. Healing is here taken as the individual's adjustment to the social space. It entails a process of enablement that involves recognition of one's essential humanity and one's worth to the immediate community. Thus it is that Simangaliso's love letter emphasises inclusion not only into the Khumalo family, but also widens this family space to include the wider community, whereas William Zulu's art (in *Spring Will Come*) helps him recognize his worth as a man among other men, while at the same time drawing the story of the black South African people. The enabling function of art is clear in these examples. This trend continues with *Moses, Citizen & Me*, where creativity is seen as an enabling tool for both the ex-child soldiers as well as for the Freetown community.

### **Shakespeare as therapy: staging the narrative of healing in *Moses, Citizen & Me***

Jarrett-Macauley's novel explores the manner in which the imagination and creativity can initiate paths towards healing for the dis(en)abled characters. Among the instances of artistic creativity featured in this text are "theatrical performance and photography" (Mackey 237). This has to do with the ex-child soldiers and Moses respectively. For the children, creativity is initially portrayed as a tool for therapy, as a way for them to recover from the trauma suffered from war. The novel is a promotion of "creative ways in the process of coping with traumatic distress" (De Rouck 61). Previous sections of this study focused on the effects of violence and social attitudes in constructing dis(en)ablement. One feature that comes to the fore in both of those analyses is the narrator's focus on 're-storying' Citizen's experience.

This search for Citizen's narrative is connected to the portrayal of various forms of creativity in the novel. There are several layers of creativity featured in relation to Citizen and the other ex-child soldiers. The most obvious is Julia's own creation of the mystical Gola forest, together with her imagining of Citizen's experiences within that space. The enabling characteristics of Julia's endeavour have already been examined in the previous chapter. In this section, the focus is on Citizen's attempts at creativity, as a way of supplanting the narrative of violence with one that is not destructive, and how those creative attempts can be read as particularly enabling. This chapter also shifts focus towards Moses, Citizen's grandfather, who in the novel is another key figure traumatized by the violence of the war, specifically the death of his wife at the hands of Citizen. I read Moses as a *disenabled* character, and examine the way his work in photography acts as a creative anchor that allows him to use the past to accept the present and look towards the future.

We can isolate two key moments where Citizen's creative potential is displayed. These are both related to his reticence as well as the narrator's need to make him talk. The first is Citizen's decision to transfer his numerical identity – 439K, tattooed on his back by the rebel soldiers – to a block of wood, and to bury it in the forest; the second is the staging of Thomas Decker's *Juliohs Siza*, which has relevance not for Citizen alone, but for the entire group of ex-child soldiers. This could be seen as the ultimate act of enablement which makes the wider world accessible to the children.

As discussed earlier, the burial of 439K signifies the moment when Citizen severs ties with the world of war violence. However, equally significant is the process of transferring the number from his back to the block of wood. When Julia first sees the scar on Citizen's back,

she is justifiably “[f]illed with misery” (46), for she knows what it signifies. This number is the third of the ‘names’ that the boy has, and it is the one that marks him most grievously. Given this numerical identity during the war, the young boy was denied his uniqueness as George or as “First Citizen of the farm” and instead reduced to just another death machine. In the forest, he became 439K. The decision to transfer 439K from his back to the block of wood is therefore a unique moment of enabling creativity as exorcism or catharsis that permits Citizen to begin recalling memories of his earlier life, before the war.

The number, which bears “the mystery of his time in the war” (163) was inscribed in a moment of violence, a moment when his innocence was torn from him, in a probable initiation into the world of war. However, although the scarring may be permanent, Citizen’s actions indicate otherwise. Transferring the number to the block of wood, simply “from the feel of 439K on his skin,” having memorised it “[l]ike a pianist committing a sonata to memory” (163), is a remarkable artistic feat. This imagery is surprisingly apt, given that a sonata is characterised by solo or accompanied musical instrumentation. Citizen’s etching of the numbers on the block of wood therefore mirrors the playing of a musical composition, which subtly foreshadows his singing later in the story. The proportions of this task are evident in the relief Citizen expresses when he gives the etched block to Julia: he looks “as though he had given up a world” (163). This is strengthened by the fact that memories of his mother begin to emerge after getting rid of 439K. Burying 439K paves way for memories of a time before the war to re-emerge in his mind, making him recall “a world of his mother’s making” (165). The change in Citizen’s demeanour after this moment lends credence to the suggestion that this act of creativity does more for him than most modes of therapy at the camp would have been able to. The Citizen who emerges after this moment is one who “[looks] rested” (165), “freshly washed” (166) and “seemed more at ease” (167). It takes the symbolic transfer of memories of the war for Citizen to embark on his journey towards healing.

This is the turning point in the narrative. We can actually argue that this is the moment when the healing process begins, even before the staging of *Juliohs Siza*. Perhaps the most significant factor about this moment is that it is Citizen’s own initiative to transfer the number onto the block of wood as a way of exorcising himself of the demons of the war. Julia’s role is simply the finding of a burial spot, and this she does in “the thickest part of the forest where the trees, a dense mass of vegetation, remained undisturbed by humans” (164),

as if to emphasize its exclusion or expulsion from the social sphere. The creativity that begins with the displacement of 439K continues with the staging of *Juliohs Siza*.

Part of *Moses, Citizen & Me*'s appeal is due to the author's inclusion of historical figures as well as other creative works that are part of Sierra Leone's history. The most significant of these inclusions are the historical photographs of Sierra Leone and Thomas Decker's *Juliohs Siza*. Jarrett-Macauley's intertextual incorporation of the play into her novel highlights the function of "theatre as a mode of rehabilitation" (Whitehead 254). The staging of the play also features as a unique form of metadiegesis, since it involves simultaneous narrating of two stories within a mystical reality (Julia's imagination). In this case, the use of a play that is a fusion of Western and African languages hints towards the need to ground rehabilitation methods in indigenous cultures. Although it has been argued that Decker's script is an example of taking "what was foreign and [making] it African" (Spencer-Walters 249), I would argue that the employment of theatre in this particular novel is not a straightforward adoption or rejection of Western methodology, but rather a modified hybrid of the same. If one looks at the political content of the play and its significance for the Sierra Leonean audience, it appears to "provide a parallel for social and political realities in Sierra Leone" (Mackey 239). Caulker argues that Decker wrote his version in part as a way of urging Sierra Leoneans to be protective of their (then) newly won independence (Caulker 212-213). For Anne Whitehead therefore, the inclusion of the play in *Moses, Citizen & Me* is the author's way of presenting "a prophetic warning unheeded" (255), paying heed to the caution voiced by Caulker. But there is another function that this play serves, beyond its political significance. This has to do with the way it transforms relations between the children and their audience.

Staging the play is an idea that Bemba G comes up with after other modes of intervention have failed. This method is particularly effective because it allows the children to relive their days of war in a way that is therapeutic. And it is an idea that the children take to quite enthusiastically, as "[t]he very idea of a play about soldiers had appealed to them" (147). The play serves various functions, both for characters in the novel and for the reader. Preparing for the public performance helps in enhancing cohesion for the children, enabling them to "[grow] into their characters and into a company" (154). It also has a profoundly healing effect:

...the experience of rehearsing and performing the play in a company or collective illustrates the important role of community in the healing process. Instead of focusing merely on individual trauma, Bemba G. emphasizes the relational experience of working collaboratively. The child soldiers begin to see themselves reflected in the characters and situations in the play, and creatively and playfully adopt the circumstances as a way of working through their own experiences as well as their relationships with one another. (Mackey 240)

*Juliohs Siza* has a unique position as a frame narrative within the story since it allows the children to relive their experiences in a form that is not destructive. They are “able to grasp the political implications of the play, its profound insight into human motives and ambitions and the significant parallels between the Roman world depicted in the drama and Sierra Leone before, during and after the civil war” (Gagiano). For Julia, rehearsing the play enables the “ending of amnesia” when the children “[meet] themselves in the play” understanding “their place in the scheme of things” (Jarrett-Macauley, *Moses* 159). As one critic observes, “[b]y performing the roles of ancient characters in the play, the child soldiers get to identify with the trauma entrenched in other histories and have a chance to process their own experiences” (De Rouck 58). This space is not one where they are used as tools of destruction, but rather as productive citizens of their country. This is a tendency of most narratives of child soldiers, where the narrative “[traces] a movement away from the power of the gun (as quasi-fetishized object as well as a signifier of community) and toward the pedagogical/healing power of the pen, crayon and/or microphone” (Mackey 177). To celebrate this rediscovery, the play ends with all the children breaking out in a song of celebration, a moment again stemming from Jarrett-Macauley’s suggestions of musical harmony (initiated by Citizen’s metaphorical sonata) as form of healing. Jarrett-Macauley points out that fusing Shakespeare into her novel “acts as a means of dramatizing the nation’s history both in the post-Independence period and within contemporary times; this fusion of past and present ills has enabled readers to make sense of this political fiction, understanding it as one that goes beyond ‘a human interest story’” (“Home”). Beyond the obvious political parallels, the play thus serves the important function of bridging generations and communities, as well as making a healing connection between a traumatic past and a ‘paralysed’ present, a function similar to that played by the beadwork in *Zulu Love Letter*. In a similar fashion, the play holds a particular significance for its audience within the text.

Citizen’s role in this play also has a recuperative purpose. At first, the narrator seeks a “speaking part” for Citizen, longing “for the moment when he dared to speak again” (147). Instead, Citizen chooses to sing a Malian song as his part in the performance, which his

colleagues recognize as an act of bravery (186). Importantly, his role as Lucius enables Citizen to reprise the death of his grandmother, but in a way that is “cathartic, allowing Citizen to finally leave the past behind” (Whitehead 255-256). In the act of playing the sleeping Lucius, Citizen dreams of his grandmother, “the glory of her voice, those assessing eyes, naked brown arms with flesh gently drooping. He thinks of tenderness and love – joining hands” (207-208). It is in the dream that Citizen “confronts the memory of [his grandmother’s] death” (Whitehead 255), and upon awakening, “[h]is face spoke of a heart softening from fossil to pearly shell” (208). This suggestion of transition is further emphasised by Jarrett-Macauley’s evoking of Adele’s prayer after the closing of the play. With this prayer, “[t]he gun falls from [Citizen’s] hands, the spell of murder over. He will never kill again” (213). This sense of closure suggested in the prayer is also echoed in the act of burying 439K. These two creative acts inaugurate the journey towards healing, and there are suggestions that this journey may become a physical one, if the dream of Citizen swimming in London is to come true. Far from being dismissed as an impossible dream, Jarrett-Macauley’s ending should therefore be heralded as a manner in which narratives “[envision] utopian futures” (Lara, *Moral Textures* 11), suggesting better ways of human co-operation.

The other dimension of enabling creativity in *Moses, Citizen & Me* is located in Moses’s photographic work. This dimension opens the novel up to another narrative that runs alongside the Citizen-centred one. Moses is the other main traumatized protagonist in the novel, although he is better at masking the signs of this trauma than Citizen is. His disenabling is connected to the grief he feels at his wife’s death and the (to him) ineradicable horror that it was their little grandson who murdered her, as well as being emblematic of a broader social malaise that has a crippling effect on the war-affected people of Sierra Leone. The narrator’s task of reuniting the two individuals in the house entails that she find a way of drawing Moses out of his depression. Since the death of his wife, Moses has been “lost” (23). And when Citizen is reintroduced into his life as a traumatised ex-child soldier, Moses is unable to accept him as his lost grandson. Instead, he regards Citizen as a “ruined” boy (16), and is unable to even bring himself to mention his name. At this stage, clearly, he cannot erase or suppress the image of the boy as the murderer of his (Moses’s) beloved wife – the boy’s own grandmother.

At the time of Julia’s arrival in Sierra Leone, Moses is in the process of building a photographic archive of Sierra Leone. It is a collection that includes the work of famous

Sierra Leonean photographers such as J. P. Decker, Alphonso Lisk-Carew, as well as his own work.<sup>43</sup> It is through this work that he too begins to find a path towards healing. The photographs and his studio together create a space that serves several functions for this man. It is “both a shrine and a studio” (9), dedicated to preserving the memories of his kin as well as the memories of his country. Seeing how immersed Moses becomes in his work, Julia is “inclined to leave him to his memories, understanding the pleasure to be gained from squeezing oneself back in time and space” (43). The photographs evoke a different time, before the country was plunged into war violence. Mirroring Julia’s imaginative journeys into Citizen’s violent past, Moses also travels in history through immersion in the photographic archive. The photographs invite him into “a world away from the chaotic Freetown of today. So many people have died here, but in those prints there was no sign of despair, death, war and mutilation, not a gesture to our utter degradation” (44). Through the collection and restoration of these photographs, Moses begins to find himself again.

The focus on photography creates a parallel plotline in *Moses, Citizen & Me*, one which mirrors the children’s theatrical performance. Together, the two narrative trajectories “[draw] the reader’s attention to history and to spatial relations” (Mackey 237) evoked in the novel. The photographs function in a similar way to the linocuts in *Spring Will Come* and the beadwork in *Zulu Love Letter*, through their description of the nation’s history and its people. They broaden the scope of the narrative, making the reader realize that the story of *Moses, Citizen & Me* is not merely a narrative of three individuals, but one that touches on the lives of various other people in Sierra Leone, past and present. Moses’s photographic work, for instance, “was so comprehensive, offering a variety of styles and themes, numerous individual and group portraits, landscapes and seascapes [...]. He had snapped at regular intervals the Cotton Tree, Freetown’s most familiar landmark, in an attempt to safeguard each phase of the city’s life” (215). Jarrett-Macauley’s inclusion of real life figures, such as the photographers J. P. Decker and Alphonso Lisk-Carew, further emphasises the work of the novel’s multiple narratives in challenging “historical amnesia” (Mackey 237). Their photographs capture Sierra Leone’s past, and therefore exist as a way in which Jarrett-

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<sup>43</sup> J. P. Decker and Alphonso Lisk-Carew are among Sierra Leone’s most famous 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers. According to Vera Viditz-Ward, “Decker was commissioned locally on a directive from the Colonial Office in London to document British colonial headquarters in Freetown, Bahurst, the Cape Coast, the Gold Coast and Nigeria. The images were primarily of government buildings and military structures. Decker’s skill and technical control are consistently apparent in his architectural photographs, and his artistic ability is reflected in his composition and vantage points” (513). Lisk-Carew, on the other hand, “was very active in the Creole community, devoting much time and energy to his church, to Freetown politics, and to his private business ventures” (Viditz-Ward 515).

Macauley evokes another world and suggests the need for this society to build bridges reconnecting their pre-civil war state of social health and cohesion with a hopefully reunited nation in the future. For Moses, the photographic archive presents an opportunity for escape from the reality of present day Sierra Leone, where he is constantly reminded of his wife's death and of the social collapse caused by the war. The images therefore bring solace to his tortured soul.

Equally important is the point that Moses's photographs strengthen Julia's imaginative construction of George (the pre-war Citizen). One of the albums, for instance, features "pictures of Citizen as a baby and at every stage of his young life" (98). Seeing the images of Citizen with loving parents affects her profoundly, especially in the realization of his present alienated state. These images of Citizen's past, "being carried in Agnes's arms" (98), "looking up to his father" (99), and on "his first day of school" (99) enable her to envision a better future for the boy and his grandfather. They suggest the possibility of retracing a narrative for Citizen that is different from the one of war violence.

The point raised above is related to one that Anita raises in the novel – the photos are only one step in the direction of healing: "You need to look forward, say what will come next – not always back" (108). The photos should not lead to Moses being anchored in the past, living in a world gone by, but should instead be balanced with a look towards the future. As Allison Mackey argues, Moses's work is "an artful instrument of truth by drawing attention to the connections between past and present and suggesting that another future is possible" (238). That explains Julia's optimistic outlook at the close of the novel, when she imagines that, together with Moses and Citizen, they "could fix the place up a bit and display the photographs of people up-country by Decker and so much more by Uncle Moses. We could do this together. And we should add those shameless scenes from which we always want to shield our eyes" (225). As an instrument of truth, the photography also highlights Sierra Leone's corruption, in which Moses was trapped and from which he is beginning to emerge.

In pre-war Sierra Leone, an unfortunate glitch in a series of pictures that Moses is commissioned to produce for a local politician reveals the darkness thinly veiled by "shots of the president on tour, [...] in Freetown making speeches, shaking hands, admiring babies, engaging with teachers and nurses, patting a small boy on the head, laughing heartily at a cultural evening" (118). The irony is in the fact that the hospitals are running low on medical supplies and the teachers have not been paid their salaries. When Moses says: "The

photograph can help [people] see the truth of who they are” (116), he is not aware of just how accurate the statement is. The anomaly is confirmed in the form of “the faintly sketched [...] figure of a small boy holding a gun” (119) appearing in each of the pictures. Moses wipes the camera lens to avoid the mistake, but “this ghostly soldier boy that has been wiped away reappears to haunt him later in the form of his own grandson” (Mackey 238-239). The notion of preserving shameful scenes here echoes the argument Bhekizwe Peterson makes in relation to post-apartheid South Africa (with the example of *Zulu Love Letter*). His emphasis is on the importance of acknowledging “the need to deal with *the past in the present*” (“Dignity” 219, italics in original), instead of attempting merely to forget the awful past and moving on. Similarly, Julia realises that the best way to move towards the future is to acknowledge both the beautiful pictures of people smiling as well as the “shameless scenes” of Sierra Leone’s more recent, brutally violent chapter of history.

Jarrett-Macauley’s treatment of all these levels of creativity is a balancing act whose success is at best, suggested, but not explicitly depicted in the novel. The narrative leaves the reader on a tentatively hopeful note. After the theatrical performance, Citizen appears more at peace, and somewhat closer to his grandfather. The estrangement between them appears to have begun dissolving, as they are seen working together in their house. It is only when the archive is nearing completion, and when Citizen pieces together the fragments of his individual narrative, that the family begins to come closer as a unit. The coherence that is created towards the end highlights the broad nature of Jarrett-Macauley’s notion of family. Instead of “Moses, Citizen and me”, the end of the novel depicts the construction of a larger family unit consisting of “Moses, Anita, Elizabeth, Olu, Citizen, Sara, and me” (222), suggesting the ameliorative sharing of experiences and the interdependence that characterises not only this small group, but perhaps eventually the entire nation of Sierra Leone as well. This larger grouping suggests the optimistic possibility of penning a new history for the nation, a project which incidentally accords with that of Mamo in *Measuring Time*.

### **Re-storying history through narrative in *Measuring Time***

The final example in the analyses of enabling metadiegetic content is Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*. Habila’s mode of narrative layering in the novel features metadiegesis at various levels, concerning the life of Mamo, but is also situated in the broader history of the village of Keti. In this, the novel reflects Habila’s “[concern] with the multiplicity of histories (and with historiography or the scripting of history as a mode of representing this

multiplicity) rather than with a unitary mode through which a singular historical reality is excavated and signified in fiction” (Roy 5). The central character in the novel is also concerned with the representation of history, to the extent that he may be seen as the author’s alter ego (Anyokwu 20). At the extradiegetic level we have the actual *bildungsroman* detailing Mamo’s life in Keti. However, there are several other stories woven into the novel in various forms. These stories function at the diegetic level, and all of them serve particular functions for Mamo as an individual as well as a member of this particular community.

*Measuring Time* appears to be driven by the need to tell stories. In fact, the novel is a story in the grander narrative of Nigerian history, particularly “the Abacha years of military dictatorship” (Roy 7). However, far from appearing as historical documentation, Habila creatively fictionalizes some of those moments of history. Mamo Lamang is the main storyteller in the text. From the earliest moment of the story, he highlights the importance of narrative to his very survival as a boy with sickle-cell anaemia, and isolated on the basis of his frailty. He is introduced to the therapeutic world of narrative by his Aunt Marina, who every now and then narrates stories to Mamo and his brother. Mamo

...came to think it was these stories that kept him alive. He imagined the stories insinuating themselves into his veins, flushing out the sickle-shaped, haemoglobin-deficient red cells that clogged the nodes in his veins and caused his joints to swell painfully. It was the stories and not the folic acid tablets that he swallowed daily, or the green vegetables and liver that were staples in his sickler’s diet, or the special care not to get bitten by mosquitoes; it was his auntie’s stories slowly working their magic into his veins, keeping him alive.  
(23)

This passage highlights the enabling functions of both narrative and the imagination from an early age, during which Mamo discovers a certain “magic” in the stories (echoing the ‘magical’ scenario evoked through Julia’s imagination in *Moses, Citizen & Me*). Through narrative, he is able to imagine a world where his body is no longer the deficient one that prevents him from socialising with other boys of his age. The rendering of narrative is thus something that he takes up himself as he grows older.

Narration appears in several forms in the novel. One early instance depicting the importance of history in narrative form is the play, “The Coming”, which portrays the “the arrival in 1918 of the village’s first missionary, Reverend Nathan Drinkwater” (40). The performance of the play highlights the manner in which the villagers employ the dramatic mode in order to keep history alive. It is staged annually by the women of the village, and Mamo eventually

has a small part in the production. He writes down the spoken lines of the actors, creating what later becomes the script of the play. In a way, this is his entry into the world of history as a discipline and its creative rendering.

Perhaps the most important form of storytelling for Mamo is the writing of a compilation of biographies, *Lives and Times* (presented in the form of prolepsis) which contains chapters detailing the lives of several people in his village. He initially plans it as “ten, fifteen biographies that [he] will eventually compile to form a biographical history of Keti” (225). However, the scope appears to grow wider with time: “In his mind he was now clear about what shape his book would take – it’d be in fifteen to twenty chapters, and each chapter would cover the life of one individual” (358). The novel offers several foreshadowed fragments of the contents of *Lives and Times*. The constant reference to the appearance of this book in the future highlights a form of agency that Mamo discovers through writing. This agency is first and foremost something that helps him to assert his self-worth, in the face of criticism from his father, which is sometimes directed at his frail body. The decision to pen this compilation eventually leads him to realise that he “was no longer the awkward, bumbling idiot his father had so mercilessly derided. He felt strong and unafraid, he had somehow outwitted his sickle-cell anemia” (196). The curative magic that he had attributed to the stories as a child is thus realised through the agency that comes from telling them, not just listening to or reading stories. It is at this level that Mamo’s disablement exists as a stimulus to creation and learning: “his illness, which had stopped him from pursuing his childhood dreams of martial glory, had pushed him to become studious and this had now opened for him other avenues for fame” (256), a development echoing Nur’s in *Lyrics Alley*.

In addition, Mamo’s “biographical history” project serves a social function. It is initially envisioned as an exercise in the rewriting of history, through which he might “capture [...] ordinary lives” (180) in his writing. The impetus for the project is the discovery of a book containing the history of his village, entitled *A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti*. In the book, the author Reverend Drinkwater had dwelt on “telling his imagined audience how really backward [Keti’s] culture is” (171).<sup>44</sup> Mamo’s project can therefore be seen as part of the postcolonial project of writing back, correcting certain misrepresented points in colonial-

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<sup>44</sup> There is a subtle echo here of the District Commissioner in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, who makes his own plans for writing a historical text entitled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* as depicted at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, intending to allow Okonkwo’s tragic story a mere “reasonable paragraph” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 184).

era recorded history. Mamo's version, which begins as "A Plan for the True History of the Keti People," adopts a different emphasis, employing

a lot of local myths and legends to illustrate his point – they were the same myths and legends used by Drinkwater in his *Brief History*, but with a different reading to emphasise what he called 'malevolent manipulation of history,' which he countered with 'benevolent manipulation of history'. (186-187)

As in the other texts discussed above, the storytelling in *Measuring Time* empowers the narrator through situating him within a particular culture, which in this case is represented by Keti village, "simultaneously the site of [Mamo's] most intimate relations and his sense of community and fellowship" (Roy 8). All of Mamo's writings derive not only from a need to exercise agency on his own behalf, but a need to serve his society through recreating its history in a manner that puts the focus on the lives of local people. That is why, in his writing to a history professor, Mamo argues that "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" (180). However, despite Mamo's love for the village and its inhabitants, Keti is no paradise. The village has bred a number of corrupt politicians, among whom is Mamo's own father, Lamang. Besides corruption, unemployment appears to be a serious problem, evident in the closure of the community-supported primary school where Mamo teaches. It is no surprise therefore that "Mamo finds that writing is his only defense against Keti's decay" (Kunzru). Through his writing, he is able to capture what Lara describes as the ability of narrative "to perform new meanings of one's life" (*Moral Textures* 44), particularly through his defiance of the directive to write on the life of the traditional leader, opting instead to focus on "the story of ordinary people, farmers, workers, housewives, and through their stories to arrive at a single overarching story" (195).

Another level of metadiegetic content is evident in Habila's text through the epistolary content that is spread throughout the novel. In a way, the narrative defies being straightjacketed into the genre of the novel since a large part of it consists of letters written by various parties. The inclusion of these letters highlights possible alternative methods for the narration of history, especially with reference to Mamo's preference for the personal details of subjects of history. These include letters by a colonial district officer, a Mr Graves; letters from a certain history professor to Mamo; and most importantly, letters that Mamo receives from his brother, LaMamo, who is away fighting. This last set of letters is of particular importance to the novel's plot development, as well as to Mamo. At a surface level, the

letters function to detail the parallel story of LaMamo's development away from home, which serves as a counter to Mamo's growth while remaining in the vicinity of the homestead. This duality suggests that even though "Mamo himself may stay put, [...] he is imaginatively involved with his brother's forays into an unpredictable world" (Roy 11). Although these letters are penned by LaMamo, the reader gets the sense of Mamo's ownership of the content, from the way he keeps them away from his father and also due to the hints at eventually penning LaMamo's story in *Lives and Times*. Therefore, they are included in the novel not merely as LaMamo's voice, but also as the raw material that Mamo will appropriate to write his brother's story.

Habila's project can also be seen as serving the same function of a rendering of history that is at the centre of Mamo's writing, hence the identification of Mamo as the author's alter ego. In a way, his mixing of genres and interweaving of stories details the multiple avenues for the telling of stories. As one critic notes, he "revises the received conventions of realism by adopting a form of hybridity, a 'remembering' that fuses paratextual elements of fiction with traditional forms of West African storytelling" (Roy 9). Therefore, both Mamo and the author seem to be challenging the old men in Keti, who steadfastly adhere to the oral form of storytelling. When Mamo publishes his essay, "A Plan for the True History of the Keti People," it is not received with enthusiasm by these elderly figures. Most of them "wanted to see if [Mamo] could tell a story very well, for to them history was more than just an account of the past, it was an art, and most of the artistry was in the telling" (189). Here, Habila deliberately draws attention to the value accorded to orature in Keti, where not everyone is literate. For these men, the written word does not hold as much authority as it does for Mamo. However, the author appears to suggest that narrative need not be in the oral format alone – depending on which audience it is intended to reach.

In relation to the previous examples, narration in *Measuring Time* is achieved by what we might call conventional means – writing. Mamo constantly works in the written form. However, like the other narratives discussed, this novel still draws attention to the multiplicity of available modes of storytelling in Africa, resembling the interweaving of numerous oral narratives on the continent. In fact, *Measuring Time* does not only suggest alternative modes – it also hints at possible hybridization of narrative forms through the mixture of folktales, rumours, letters, notes, diaries, sketches, and newspaper reports, among others. Habila's novel thus mimics the composition of the bead project in *Zulu Love Letter*, in the sense that it is built up of fragments of stories – told by other people – that collectively

form a community narrative. In spite of Mamo's portrayal as an alienated figure in the novel, his contributions to the village's history serve to emphasise his presence as part of it as framed by the novel, indeed, as a cohesive and future-directed force within it.

## **Conclusion**

With its focus on the multiple layers of narrative forms, this discussion has illustrated the manner in which the creation of narratives has the potential to act as a channel for narrative enablement for various characters. In this case, narrative enablement manifests through creative practice displayed in the texts. In the six examples discussed in this chapter, the artistic imagination is employed as a tool for both self-expression and social inclusion. In these examples therefore, creativity is posited as an enabling tool both for the disabled individuals as well as for their immediate communities. In the same way that the disabled characters cannot be divorced from their context, their artistic productions achieve additional and more complex meanings when read against their particular backgrounds and with recognition of the inclusion of this background in the creative forms rendered by the disabled characters in the featured texts.

To the keen consumer of these narratives, the surprise is in the discovery of not just a single story, but multiple stories woven together. The metadiegetic level of narrative allows for the examination of the function of the story embedded within another story, or interwoven with a number of others. In the examples analysed above, these embedded and entangled narratives are striking because they usually do not follow conventional (linear; verbal or literary) modes of storytelling. Furthermore, they enrich the primary narrative through the articulation of parallel, supplementary, or even contrasting storylines. The artistic strategies of narrativisation adopted by these characters constitute part of the texts' narrative enablement. Highlighting alternative modes of narrative therefore brings to attention other creative possibilities, which in these texts are forms of enablement precisely due to their adaptability and variety.

## **Conclusion: towards a novel epistemology of disability**

“He who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me”.

(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* 170)

In this thesis I have demonstrated how the selected narratives represent disablement in varied, complex ways and convey the disabled characters as multifaceted figures involved in their varied communities through their resistance to ableist dehumanisation and their re-writing of these communities’ stories. In this conclusion, I would like to reflect on some of the important concepts that have arisen in the course of this study, and some of the implications that arise from these concepts.

From the outset, the most important concept in this thesis has been that of narrative enablement, a phrase that informed the thesis title and embodied the task of this entire work. For me, this idea is potentially helpful in extending the ways of reading disability, particularly in African imaginative texts. I see narrative enablement as having the potential to broaden the possibilities inaugurated by Quayson’s “aesthetic nervousness” and Mitchell and Snyder’s “narrative prosthesis”. The former focuses rather exclusively on formal features of literary texts, at the expense of socio-cultural contexts, whereas “narrative prosthesis” is a rather reductive (and negative) approach to the presence of disability in the creative imaginary and is hardly exhaustive of all existing literature on the subject. This study has illustrated a different approach, one which pays heed to indigenous contexts, the intersection of identities, as well as creative interventions within the texts.

The collection of films, memoirs and novels discussed in this thesis serves the important function of bringing to the global discourse of disablement a unique (and to some, new) way of regarding disablement that may not agree with preconceived (read ‘Western’) notions of disablement. Narrative enablement is proposed as something the texts achieve through both the challenging of Western definitions of disability as well as their interventions, in extending existing epistemologies of disability. This is not a way of essentialising African experience, but rather one of drawing attention to the fact of alternative modes of reading disablement which contribute to broadening and diversifying knowledge of its complexity as a topic and provide access to other (African) forms of it, as ‘understandable’ experience. Furthermore, narrative enablement is manifested in the way the texts, as narratives embodying African experiences of conditions of disablement, broaden and enrich existing theoretical

perspectives which have proceeded from narrower and geographically (and ideologically) more restricted contexts.

The selected narrative interventions are particularly useful in publicising such alternative epistemologies of disablement, as seen in the discussions in the previous chapters. As Clare Barker observes:

Postcolonial disability narratives can also act as a check on the totalizing tendencies of disability discourses – both oppressive local constructions of disability and the imported western interpretive frameworks from which disability studies usually operates. (*Postcolonial Fiction* 191)

Barker indicates here that the challenge is not only to Western definitions of disability, but also to “oppressive local constructions of disability”, or what Achebe calls “malignant fictions” (*Hopes* 148). This study has shown that narrative enablement is also to be found in the manner in which these texts challenge master narratives of disability within the postcolonial space itself. These master narratives are born from myths and other forms of folklore that become embedded as social practices through acquiring the status of ‘tradition’, and are formative narratives for what ends up as stereotyping.<sup>45</sup>

Above all, the capacity of the texts to achieve narrative enablement is dependent upon the artistic qualities of that text. As indicated at the commencement of this project, the texts discussed in this thesis were not selected simply because they contain depictions of disablement in Africa. Rather, they were chosen because they do so in such an evocative manner that they leave those depictions imprinted on the mind of the reader/viewer. More than any analysis I can provide for the written texts or the films, it is their own intrinsic illocutionary force that has the potential to affect their audiences. This quality lies in the capacity of the texts to project alternative, better realities that destabilize constructions of the other, particularly but not only the disabled other. The arguments made in this thesis have depended primarily on the skilful and talented artistry of these writers and filmmakers.

My discussion in this thesis approached the topic of narrative enablement from several angles. The first chapter, through its focus on the experiential and masculinity, was meant as

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<sup>45</sup> Hove’s *Ancestors* (1996) exemplifies these master narratives through its portrayal of a woman who is deaf and cannot speak, and is regarded as having less value than other women. Years after her death, her spirit ‘possesses’ a young boy, to whom she tells her story, thus finally acquiring a ‘voice’. Another example of these malignant fictions, featured in the written text, is Meg Vandermerwe’s recently published *Zebra Crossing* (2013), which features a young albino woman who is both despised and exploited due to her ‘different’ appearance.

an entry point into some of the complex lives that are depicted in the selected texts. The focus in that chapter was not so much the text's medium as it was the lives of the characters in the text; a strategy intended to establish, from the outset, how the characters are made to seem 'familiar' or recognisable to the reader. My reading of texts such as *Able-Bodied* and *Lyrics Alley* in the first chapter helped to illustrate how creative imaginaries can present a window into the experiential, through intimate and skilful depictions of disabled characters' lives. With its focus on masculinity, this chapter initiated a revelation of intersections between disability and other markers of identity. The depiction of disability in male characters challenges the way we understand masculinities. For example, a text such as *Lyrics Alley* draws attention to the way masculinity may be defined in particular African locations.<sup>46</sup> Nur's disability in the novel is therefore not only a metaphor for the nation. It allows the reader to appreciate constructions of masculinity in the dominantly Islamic and patriarchal Sudanese context, while the author's powerful writing allows the reader vicariously to experience the initial anguished losses Nur has to endure because of being disabled in young adulthood and how he later on manages to live a fulfilling creative life by developing his poetic art. The discussion in this chapter also revealed parallels in the trajectories of the disabled characters' lives in *Lyrics Alley*, *Spring Will Come* and *The Language of Me*, despite existing class differences.

In the second chapter, I proposed the term *disenablement* as a way of considering how authors illustrate the social disablement of entire populations of people. The term helpfully showcases how violence can lead to the immobilising of an entire nation of people. A focus on disablement allows the recognition of intersections between disability and other markers of identity. *Deafening Silence* and *Camp de Thiaroye* provide useful examples of such intersections. In the former, Moleko's predicament also reveals to the reader the highly discriminatory world of apartheid South Africa. Similarly, *Camp de Thiaroye* draws parallels between the ableist discrimination suffered by Pays and the racist discrimination experienced by him and the other black soldiers in the film. What this means is that, as opposed to the rather rigid identification of disablement as narrative prosthesis – as “an explicitly complicating feature of [...] representational universes” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 2) – it is indeed possible to read the representation of disability as something

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<sup>46</sup> A similar phenomenon occurs in Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* (1996), in which the writer uses the character of Miriro, a woman who is born deaf and mute, to highlight patriarchy's silencing of women in colonial Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). In the text, this particular character is 'doubly subaltern' due to her position as a disabled woman: she is treated especially harshly because of her disability, but this is an intensification of her subjugation (within her traditional family and community) because of her gender.

beyond a mere implement of representation, through its interaction with other areas of marginalization. In the two examples above, racial discrimination is highlighted alongside ableism. The chapter examined connections between disablement and violence in various African contexts, and further highlighted ways in which affected characters negotiate these terrains. The discussion examined how socio-political violence on the continent is represented as a cause of both disablement and disenablement, and how the two sometimes become intertwined in the creative imagination.

The dis/ability zone emerges as another crucial concept in the study. In the third chapter, I discussed this zone as it is displayed in the texts, as a space where the reader/viewer witnesses the fluidity of socially constructed disablement in particular societies. The chapter illustrated how this zone, where the disabled characters encounter the ableist world, permits a novel understanding of misfitting through destabilization of particular frames of disablement. Focusing on characters such as Simangaliso (*Zulu Love Letter*), the disabled beggars in *Xala*, and the mentally and physically scarred children in *Moses, Citizen & Me*, the chapter illustrated how social structures can be used to reverse the role or image of the misfit in various societies, potentially leading to the recognition or (re-)acceptance of these characters within their communities. If we focus on the texts themselves as forms of narrative enablement, another, perhaps more important way of reading the dis/ability zone comes to light. The texts illustrate how disability in the Global South is deeply enmeshed with other marginalities. This co-existence of different identities is yet another point that Ato Quayson, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder do not make much of, yet it holds the potential to highlight novel readings not only of disability, but also of other identities and the intersections among those concerned in any specific instance.

One of the more explicit threads connecting the various texts has been the emergence of creative interventions by disabled characters within their broader communities. In the fourth chapter, I argued that the various disabled characters use unique modes of storytelling not only to narrate their story, but also to assert their belonging to particular familial, cultural, as well as national worlds. More importantly, by showing the disabled characters to be directly involved in the (re)production of their communities' histories, these texts re-insert disabled subjectivity into otherwise ableist African nationalist discourses. These modes of creativity included William Zulu's linocut prints, Simangaliso's bead-work, Citizen's play-acting and singing, Musa Zulu's pencil sketches, Nur's poetry and Mamo's rewriting of history. These activities are not only means of providing the disabled character with a voice, but also of

illustrating the wider scope of the narratives, through displaying the characters' awareness of, and involvement in, their familial, social and political contexts. In these texts, creativity allows the reader/viewer to recognize the complexity of the characters in their multiple roles as citizens, daughters, fathers, sons, artists and lovers – not just disabled characters.

These chapters have led to this point, and to the realisation that narrative enablement is not a feature limited to the characters populating these imaginative works. This concept, partly discovered and partly exemplified in the various analyses constituting this dissertation, motivates this entire study, since it is in this region where the potential lies for the transformation of attitudes. Much as the deployment of various forms and types of significance of narrative enablement within the story may be enlightening, I am more interested in what this text does for and possibly to, the reader. This is a goal echoing Martha Nussbaum's ambition in *Poetic Justice* (1995), among her other works – the potential for imaginative works to improve the moral fabric of the worlds from which they emanate. As Lara observes, in a cyclic manner, “[n]arratives draw on the materials of everyday life [and], as the stories unfold in the public sphere, they return to and reconfigure life itself” (*Moral Textures* 93). Upon entering the public sphere, comprised of its audience, the text hopes to play an ambassadorial role for disabled persons. It is this process that is ultimately most important to the present undertaking. The texts discussed promote the recognition of (in particular) the disabled African Other. On the surface, this emerges through the portrayal of disabled characters as not only defined by their disabilities, but as both complex and familiar (‘recognisable’) characters. More importantly, however, the enabling quality of these texts stems from the fact that they communicate impressions and ideas that not only have to do with disability, but also touch on other subjects pertinent to the general human condition. In these imaginative texts are contained knowledge systems made available to the reader/viewer, enabling an acknowledgement of a diversity of views not only regarding disability, but concerning humanity in its various shades, and in particular bringing African experiences of and responses to disability into clearer perception. For me, this opens up the exciting possibility of approaching texts in different genres, and from different geographical locations (even beyond Africa), with a similar aim of exploring their capacity for narrative enablement.

As this discussion illustrates, narrative enablement cannot be tied down to a single effect achieved by the text. It is the overall effect of multiple aspects of the imaginary, related to how it adds nuance to other identifying markers; how it reshapes the world of the reader; how it gives disabled characters a voice; as well as how it challenges (and enriches) both Western

and local epistemologies of disablement. Above all, narrative enablement functions as a form of recognition. By re-inscribing what is possible in creative practice, these texts inaugurate the act of recognition in the reader/viewer. It is in this fashion that the texts become “illocutionary forces in the public sphere [...] redrawing the understanding of conceptions of justice and the good life” (Lara, *Moral Textures* 151). In as far as the thesis enables this recognition in the reader, it will have achieved its prime function.

The discussions in this thesis draw attention to the relevance of such narratives not only as forms of entertainment, but also modes of learning. As works of the creative imagination, they demonstrate ways of connecting with other people in a manner that can potentially positively affect ways of looking at the world and at other people. This is what makes them valuable additions not only to the archive of literary works, but to the archive of critical thought on the continent and to the fields of disability and postcolonial studies.

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