

## The nation as metaphor: Ben Okri, Chenjerai Hove, Dambudzo Marechera

*metaphors are the public history of nations* (with apologies to Balzac). (Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form')<sup>1</sup>

### Unreal nation

The first, post-1945 phase of anti-colonial nationalism in Africa, as in other colonised regions, was distinguished by *literal* belief structures: a strong, teleological faith in the actual existence of the nation as 'people', and the sense that history essentially unfolded as a process of that nation's coming-into-being. There was a belief, too, in Africa as in South Asia, as in the Caribbean, that the distinctive forms of modernity, in this case in particular the sovereign state, could be incorporated, indigenised, repatriated.<sup>2</sup> These may seem at face value rather obvious statements to make about nationalism, which broadly demands some form of belief in the national entity, and acts of loyalty expressed towards it. Yet the obviousness here is part of the point. In post-independence Africa, as in other former colonies, the nation as a group defined by particular observable traits and/or a distinctive, ascertainable history, was for some time believed to have a geopolitical, historical and even spiritual existence. Crucially, it was also seen to provide a means through which identities detached from European stereotypes, and distinctive, local (in this case African) modernities might be generated.

However, in the decades since independence, as the coherence of the nation – whether as geophysical space, symbolic leadership or unitary people – has been questioned in various ways, especially perhaps in Africa, national self-awareness in fiction, if not the concept of the nation itself, has undergone significant shifts and revisions. In consequence, as was intimated in the previous chapter, writers acting out of both disillusionment and cynicism have come round to concentrating on the imaginative as opposed to the actual status of the nation. The *constructedness* of the nation is now engaged as an issue and,

in certain more recent writings, as a source of invention. Writers investigate metaphor, symbol, dream and fetish as signifiers of a national reality or as constituents of a sense of national being, rather than the nation as literal truth. Under a range of pressures – political dislocations and violence, economic trauma, geographical and cultural displacements, other forms of national schizophrenia – the *made up* nature of nationhood has emerged into greater prominence. And so, as the split between nationalist fantasy and nation-state reality has been teased open, the emphases have heftily shifted in the once-grand tale, as recorded in leaders' autobiographies, of African national coming-into-being.

Mid- to late 1980s narratives from a range of writers – Achebe, Farah, Ben Okri, Chenjerai Hove and Dambudzo Marechera, among others (including the early 1980s writing of Bessie Head) – attest that it is the nation's story *as story*, and as nightmare, that forms the focus of attention. Writers are now preoccupied with the at-once-liberating-yet-appalling possibility of there being no there *there*. The fact that women have long been aware of the metaphorisation of their social realities may explain why more men than women writers have been involved in exploring the nation as metaphor in this new phase. The open secret is that the formulation of a national eschatology and identity depends not so much on an 'actual' national history of national coming-into-being as on fictions of the nation – fictions ostentatiously, even obscenely, crafted, exuberantly dreamed up; on nations represented in and as story.

Within such narratives, as this chapter will explore in relation to Okri, Hove and Marechera in particular, symbols no longer figure merely as the signs of nationhood, but are understood as substantively representative and constitutive of national belief, if not of the nation itself. The nation is a space in which the people and the state entity *collude* in generating and exchanging the significations of power, while narrative at once reflects on, and participates in, this process. Instead of codifying the new national reality, as did Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi from the 1950s, the African novel now explores that codification as process; it situates itself on the *performative* rather than the *pedagogical* axis of nation-state existence.<sup>3</sup>

The seemingly hallucinogenic, disjunctive writing of the Nigerian-born British writer Ben Okri can be taken as iconic of this shift in preoccupation from the material to the mythic, animist, and even surrealist dimensions of national reality. That said, it is important to concede that on Okri's part this shift at the same time entails a formal and epistemological engagement with traditional Yoruba myth-systems, and an intertextual convention of writing about the bush established by D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and, later, Wole Soyinka.<sup>4</sup> Okri's two collections of short stories, *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), and his cyclical novel *The Famished Road* (1991), the first in a trilogy completed in 1998, dramatise the elaborate, nightmarish displays

that are part of quotidian existence in the African postcolonial nation.<sup>5</sup> His landscapes, in particular the road walked by the *abiku* or spirit child in *The Famished Road*, are extravagantly 'tropographic', charged with portents. A path can be a mysterious script of dream signals, a palimpsest of signs from other spiritual planes, each as palpable and 'real' to the *abiku* Azaro as any other. Okri maps the otherworldly spaces of the neocolonial city, its compounds and outskirts, as a phantasmic or occult phase of alienated social being resembling that which Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth* with reference to the pre-national, colonial period.<sup>6</sup> As magical excursions relentlessly rupture his narratives, and as daimons, symbols and other mystical occurrences irrationally, even profligately, exhibit themselves, not only the nation as such but the violent and seductive dream of the nation is revealed as a key reagent, if not malign motive force, in recent neocolonial history.

Okri favours invention – what he calls *dreaming* – over convention or tradition both in the composition of his fiction and in understanding the world.<sup>7</sup> Breaking a dominant trend in African writing, his concern is to avoid handing down normative images of African national reality derived from the oral tradition or from the nationalist realist style of the early decades of independence. In contrast both to the colonial writing which placed Africa as signifier of the exotic and the forbidden, and to early nationalist writing which sought to reverse colonial stereotypes, Okri's worlds have absorbed the extremes of the exotic and the real. In his tales syncretic display is inescapable: frenetic heterogeneity, surrealist confusion, these make up the world. His fiction participates actively in what Harry Garuba and others have discussed as 're-traditionalisation' processes in post-independence Africa, whereby traditional cultural forms, such as ancestor worship, are used to incorporate and interpret the signs and objects of the modern world.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to Garuba, such 're-emergences' may be probed as manifestations of an 'animist unconscious', in relation to which abstract states of mind manifest in concrete forms. Such a characterisation would certainly apply to aspects of Okri's work up to 1991. His work since has arguably become more imbued with a New Age-type spiritualism.

Where dreaming or an animist consciousness saturates reality, one consequence may be the evacuation of public political spheres as spaces of resistance, as will be seen. Yet in Okri the combination of a collective, escapist madness with the peculiarly cynical quality of the destruction inflicted on people by 'the powers that be', can at the same time produce a mordantly cutting, if also disaffected political commentary. Okri's urban slum society is at the extremity of its illusions, including those of national independence. It has been tricked, deceived, betrayed: quack chemists stock 'curved syringes' and bogus medicines; elections by definition involve 'political fevers and riggings'; city god-fathers spray counterfeit money at crowds of supporters; wars of divided national identity create irrational enmities.<sup>9</sup> The present moment is shown to

be the outcome of a long political history of cruelty and irrationality, both colonial and neocolonial, into which the people have been drawn as accomplices. The nation, too, is deeply imbricated in the overriding logic of exploitation and deception. This is in effect *post*-post-independence fiction that does not pretend to invoke a higher political meaning or truth – indeed it cannot hope to. Nation-state politics – the political rivalry of the Parties of the Rich and the Poor in *The Famished Road*, for example – is presented as one more symbolic display among others, all of them ironic, surreal, absurd.

### Postcolony

The nation in Okri, therefore, to the extent that it is in fact recognised either as ideal or as political entity, is a phantasmagoria comprising demonstrations of random cruelty and pomp, and fetishes of abusive power and bizarre magic. Even so, as his stories and novels repeatedly make clear, such phantasms are to be understood as part of *lived* existence and thus as ‘real’, not as escapist mystifications: the spiritual frames of existence have the same status of believability as the material world. The nation, in other words, is not represented *by* unreality so much as that it *is* (un)reality. This literalisation of the metaphoric in Okri coincides interestingly (and, as regards the future of the nation-state for Africa’s intellectuals, revealingly) with the philosopher Achille Mbembe’s suggestive, if pessimistic, postmodern characterisation of the African *postcolony*.<sup>10</sup> Mbembe sees the postcolonial nation as defined by its excessive symbolisation of arbitrary authority – in fact as saturated with such symbolisation but also as emptied of its ‘nationness’ (due to the people’s lack of citizenship). The postcolony forms a ‘regime of unreality’ and violence, an entire obscene cosmology, from which there is no exit route. Within this regime power has ‘fallen’ from the hands of those supposed to be exercising it, creating ‘a situation of extreme material scarcity, uncertainty, and inertia’ in which the state begins to wither away.<sup>11</sup>

To explicate this historical sclerosis Mbembe turns to the structures of colonial sovereignty, which he names *commandement*, structures distinguished by the arbitrary deployment of a self-legitimising violence. However, whereas the colonial state imposed its unconditional power to achieve certain levels of economic productivity, the postcolony, which might also be called the *unreal nation*, has failed to replace colonial structures with workable economic and political systems of regulation and order.<sup>12</sup> In their stead have grown up ‘state entities’ within which unconditional power has become fully socialised, the ‘cement’ of the authoritarian regime. Although the early postcolonial state did initially collaborate in creative ways with indigenous social ties and traditional economic bases, like market networks, these prodigal, prebendal, at times parasitic structures eventually proved inflexible to global economic pressures. In

consequence, in Mbembe's view, economies in the postcolony are often operative only within small, transnationalised, highly predatory enclaves. Moreover, the perpetuation of traditional elite structures has produced an unprecedented level of privatisation, including of the security forces, resulting in the further generalisation throughout the society of armed violence.

Arbitrary power in the postcolony thus converts itself into a common reality, structuring all social meanings, in which the obscene and scatological (the Bakhtinian grotesque) operate not merely as parodies of power but are intrinsic to the system, deployed as part of the spectacle of authority. In this situation the binary oppositions of domination and resistance (as in Okri) melt away: the state is characterised by relations of disturbing conviviality between the ruler and the ruled. 'Those who laugh . . . are simply bearing witness, often unconsciously, that the grotesque is not more foreign to officialdom than the common man is impervious to the charms of majesty'.<sup>13</sup> The ruled *at once* domesticate the fetishes of state power *and* ridicule them. At this point Mbembe's ideas exhibit a contradiction in the fact that his dominated are simultaneously as zombified as the dominant, their allies, yet (due to the unstable pluralism of the society) able to splinter and morph their identities and negotiate different social spaces seemingly as agents. It is for this reason that unexpected coups and overthrows do occur.<sup>14</sup> However, with respect to the postcolonial nation in Africa represented by the writers discussed here, he accurately characterises how the ruler's power, constantly on show, theatrical, gross, extravagant, rabidly phallogocratic, impels the participation of the ruled. That this participation is expressed mainly as derision is a backhanded acknowledgement that the state's power is incontestable – an acknowledgement that then allows the postcolonial subject to ridicule it all the more. The fetishes of state power, which are all-pervasive, are also revealed as a sham.

Although for Mbembe the nation has strictly speaking bankrupted itself out of existence because of the *commandement*, his reading of the postcolony relates productively to writers' understanding of the nation as constituted in metaphor, and lived as unreality. As in the work of the younger, mid- and late 1980s generation, the nation becomes a densely textured mix of symbolic narratives and collective fantasies, some of them necessary illusions, others knowing deceptions. A nation's history, such as it is, they imply, can be best explained as the performance, often grotesquely flawed, of mythic and fabular tales. This writing therefore bears witness to crises in national confidence running across Africa, the perception that nationalism as the *modus operandi* of governments has been used to legitimate abuses of power and absurd displays of megalomania, with consequences both tragic and banal. In terms that are different from yet related to Mbembe's, the situation is one in which nationalism is detached from its associations with honour, unity, lofty purpose, belonging. National identity becomes less an ideal than a dilemma,

an agon or a burlesque.<sup>15</sup> As Jean Franco has commented of like developments in Latin American writing, in such a world, nationalist truths will inevitably come to be perceived as empty metaphors or as jokes.<sup>16</sup>

It is relevant to add here that the political scepticism of writers and the breakdown in their national commitment has of course been affected by their experiences of internal and/or external exile, the often uninvited condition of national truancy which has become pervasive among Third World elites. Fleeing political repression or economic deprivation, encountering experiences of estrangement as migrants in the metropole, writers in exile have become perhaps the most prominent and vocal interrogators of nationalist doctrine. Okri, for instance, came to Britain in 1978 on a scholarship from Nigeria, where he has lived ever since. Marechera, for his part, spent the years 1974 to 1982 in Britain initially as a student in Oxford, then, following his 'sending down', attempting to make it as a writer within the lower depths of squatter communes and prison. Chenjerai Hove escaped Robert Mugabe's increasingly autocratic Zimbabwe in 2002 in order to live in exile in France. As these and other writers reconstruct lost 'imaginary homelands' in their fiction, or remember back to their own compromised national pasts, they vividly experience the uncertainty and provisionality, indeed the fictionality, of national realities.<sup>17</sup> Reconstructing a national consciousness in writing, they are in an ideal position to demonstrate the writerliness of that consciousness.

It is a writerliness which operates fruitfully at both the diachronic and synchronic axes of narrative. On the one hand (though these processes are not mutually exclusive), writers exploit the structural analogies between *nations* and *narrations*: the preoccupation with origins, the maintenance of continuity over time, the synthesis of difference into a unified whole.<sup>18</sup> To expatiate on the title of Homi Bhabha's edited collection *Nation and Narration*, where the 'real-life' political nation fails to provide meaningful codes of identity, writers turn instead to narrative structures in order to locate the signifying forms with which to give shape to an 'unreal' social life. On the other hand, as was seen in earlier chapters, writers self-reflexively elaborate on the figurality or quasi-religious symbolic logic that has long been embedded in nationalism.<sup>19</sup> The icons which were definitively associated with particular national entities – metaphors of wholeness, unity and the purity of its origins, images of the gendered national body, or of the harmonious consort of the national community – are now recognised for what they are, as literary conceits rather than national truths. What is more, the supposed national reality is no longer seen as naturally generating the symbols – flags and figureheads – that will signify and define its character. Instead, invented symbolic structures – fictions *and* narrative figures – are adopted and reshaped as the primary *embodiments* of an illusory nationhood. So, in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), for example, Chinua Achebe cryptically but insightfully pointed to the conglomerations of metaphor which make up a postcolonial

national reality. In Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps* (1986), as more cynically in Okri, dream and vision were used to develop new morphologies for imaging a damaged polity.

By way of a provisional summary, whereas in the immediate post-independence period writers assume that story helps to constitute nationhood, or forms the cultural wealth of the nation, more recently they audaciously imply that it is in story and metaphor that nationhood is *chiefly* defined. The novel in the postcolony simultaneously participates in and denounces the regime of unreality. This need not necessarily mean, however, that national beliefs are jettisoned completely. Especially if writers exist in a condition of exile, even if internal exile, they use the critical distance of narrative to denaturalise or 'de-doxify' the neocolonial system of truth (where 'doxa' represents received public opinion).<sup>20</sup> In this regard the practice of the African and South Asian writers discussed in this book departs interestingly from that of contemporary novelists in, for example, postcolonial Australia. As in Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) or Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998), national signifiers, no matter how self-reflexive and postmodernly arch, are deployed in sizeable numbers not merely to signify but effectively to overdetermine the surrounding national reality. The real world status and significance of the national hold good. These two iconic Australian novels teem with recognisably national metonyms – fakes, liar figures and a farm filled with eucalyptus – all of which ultimately refer back to the master signified, Australia.

### Nation as metaphor: Hove and Marechera

In his novella *Bones* (1988), the Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove has given close ear to the so-called 'divinity' present in, and traduced by, everyday nation-state existence.<sup>21</sup> In *Bones* a mother Marita, a worker on a white farm, travels to the city on a quest for her guerrilla son, and is killed, presumed murdered by agents of the state. Her prospective daughter-in-law Janifa mourns her, is raped and becomes mad. When at the end of the novel Marita's son finally returns (though he may be merely an apparition in Janifa's distressed mind), Janifa rejects him. In contrast with the brute reality described by these social relations, which occur both before and after the always implicit moment of Zimbabwean independence, it is evident that collective memory based in the oral tradition, and enacted in the multivoiced narrative structure, alone retains a redemptive power for the community.

Written a decade after the time in which it is set, Hove's short novel can be read as an oblique and wistful retrospective comment on the hierarchical, alienated state that passes for independent Zimbabwe. The city, a predatory, male space, is represented as the seat of government and is remote from the people. Ancestral voices alone, represented chiefly by the voice of the spirit-medium

Nehanda, signify a hoped-for national unity, yet the novel's highly symbolic, temporally static writing may at the same time point to the possible dangers of an over-idealised formation of the nation on the basis *primarily* of communal traditions. In this sense the romanticised complex metaphor of the ancestors' bones, welcoming their return to the dispossessed land yet oddly unable to envisage their inclusion in everyday village life, provides an ironic index to the alienation of ordinary people from state hegemonies. With the benefit of hindsight the metaphor could even be seen as a sideways comment on the cynical deployment of land redistribution programmes in Zimbabwe.

To tell his tale of nationalist conflict and compromise, revival and return, Hove uses a chorus of different voices, traditional and contemporary, rural and urban, named and unnamed. This polyphonic form allows him to range across a set of different conceptual and metaphoric structures in an attempt to typify proto-national being from the point of view of the village. In the course of this search, the trope of the ancestors' returning bones, which embraces some of the dualities of the recent national experience, yet develops out of oral legend, is set up as a definitive emblem of the Zimbabwe-to-be. As Hove has said, his aim in *Bones* was to force English, a language of abstraction, to 'tell a story in imagery', as does his native Shona, even though his apparent imitation of the latter language is highly impressionistic.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, I would want to suggest, his use of the complex bones symbol, however nostalgic its construction, can be taken as an organising metatextual figure (at once critical and collusive) for the representation of the national community in – and as – metaphor.

In a pivotal section at the centre of *Bones*, a litany on the events of 1897, the time of Rhodesian land alienation and the first *chimurenga* or war of resistance, the bones of the ancestors are seen 'falling like feathers' (B 47). Yet, despite the advent of the big guns and the wasting diseases brought by the white man, the bones are urged to rise again from the battlefield that is the nation-in-formation. Figures of mats, clouds, tongues of fire, sky, insects, tightly connected with Shona oral motifs, are made to overlap and cross over as the bones are transfigured into redeeming armies:

I saw many bones spread like rough mats on large plains and on the hills. Bones spread like rough mats on the banks of the rivers and in the water. But the fish would not eat them. Rising bones. They spoke in many languages which I understood all. Tongues full of fire, not ashes. Clouds of bones rose from the scenes of many battles and engulfed the skies like many rain birds coming to greet the season. There were so many bones I could not count them. So many they made the sky rain tears. Some I did not see where they were buried, but they leapt into the sky like a swarm of locusts, with such power that they broke the branches of the sky where they rested in their long journey to places I did not know. Right across the land of rivers that flooded all the time, they heaved on the chest of the land until they formed one huge flood which trampled on the toes of armed strangers. (B 49)

The 'songs of the endless bones' signify a heritage of struggle and a directive for the future, yet, despite their weight of history and authority, the songs are also recognised as constituted out of words that are 'weak . . . Very weak. They fly in the wind like feathers. Feathers falling from a bird high up in the clouds' (B 59). The words are the weightless birds of a history that has till recently been misplaced and partially forgotten. Bones and words are linked by the metaphor of feathers: both are light, perhaps frail. Both, however, as the residues of history, connect across the generations. In an interesting reversal of the idea of the postcolony as predominantly phallographic, as is explored in this book, in Hove, whereas the bones are sexless (although the fighters are male), words and images in the oral tradition are the domain of women. As Caroline Rooney has recognised, by charting the opposition of state to family, *Bones* pays respect to those who have been written out of official history, in particular peasant women.<sup>23</sup>

With the ancestral bones figure, therefore, Hove impacts collective and already interconnected symbols from oral tradition to find a suitable paradigm for the nation's shared and fractured history. A highly pictorial, customary language seemingly transliterated from vernacular sources and including the voices of spirits, allows him to inflect the act of imagining that history towards what could be called the communal symbolic. With the fading memory of the event and the dying of the fighters, we are told, the village community transposes the struggle into song. The fighters who visit the villages 'always had new things to say' and '[i]f they had nothing to say, they had something to sing. If they had nothing to sing, they had something to dance' (B 73). Without shared song and image, the notion of a national historical struggle would be obscure, or in Marita the old woman's appropriately metaphorical words: 'If the birds and insects refused to sing, what would the forest be?' (B 75).

Old wisdom and new knowledge, war involvements both collaborative and oppositional, communings between past and present, living and dead: a broad range of experience in *Bones* is conceived and anticipated in metaphor, and remembered and commemorated in the same way. History is at once lived and told by way of proverb and parable; it is experienced and received as already symbolic, already mythic, and in this case it is *not* unreal. In that the characters hold double roles as representative historical actors and as interpreters of that history, they make (compose, create) their history even as they are making (living) it. Images from the oral tradition are continually adapted and reinterpreted to construct a contemporary historical and yet parabolic account. The *mhondoro* Nehanda herself speaks at one point in the place of Marita. Natural imagery, too, presumably drawn from collective rural experience, is used to evoke ideas of historical displacement and replacement: 'when leaves fall, they are doing so, so that other new leaves may come, leaves of the same pattern, the same smell, but on different nodes' (B 88).<sup>24</sup> '[R]oots drink from the rotten

leaves and feed the inside of the tree again so that new leaves can sprout' (B 97). Names, too, are a conduit for history: 'a name tells many stories, many paths that have been walked with bare feet' (B 105).

Given that *Bones* narrates the highly polarised late war situation from the point of view of a rural community, the freedom fighters are not directly present, yet their influence is palpable everywhere. It is an influence again transmitted by way of legend and symbol. National *imaginings* in this context are nothing new. The fighters are seen as demonic and yet as saviours, as fearful monsters recalled from grandparents' tales of 'long-toothed ogres' (B 39–40, 59). They are fantastic characters, more spirit than human, representing threat and promise: 'do they not say a terrorist eats people without roasting them?' (B 4). And, again:

my sister, have you heard the stories people were spreading about the children when they came back? Some said their shoes pointed the other way when they are going one way. Some said their bodies were so strong the bullets of the soldiers did not go through their skins. All sorts of things like the one about how the fighters disappeared when the soldiers came. They said all the women became heavy with children, so when the soldiers came, they would not beat up pregnant women. After they left all the women just passed some air and there the fighters were. (B 69–70)

Through the medium of such proverbial and mythical figures, the narrative develops incrementally, circularly, imagining communal history by way of recursive metaphors of survival, restoration and revival, and looking forward to an alternative, more heterogeneous and inclusive national consciousness. Simultaneously, with each recurrence, the key metaphors in the narrative underscore its circular unfolding and are mutually reinforced. Their pervasiveness in the text and the thickness of their significance demonstrate the inconceivability of narrating a nation's history without such tools. With the benefit of hindsight, however, they also betray that, in a neocolonial situation where ruled and ruler collude in a regime of almost legendary violence, metaphor, even from an apparently static peasant tradition, may be manipulated, deformed and corrupted, used to signify death rather than rebirth. In Mbembe's words, 'the debris of the ritual acts of the past . . . intertwined . . . form the postcolonial dramaturgy'.<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that towards the end of the novel the vision of the returning bones of the dead is once again, chillingly, repeated, in a way that does not suggest rebirth:

dreams of rains, bones and footsteps falling from the height of a cliff, scattering to the earth while the boys in the field whistle and shout as if they have seen a vulture tearing away the flesh of a carcass. Bones in flower-like flames of skeletons spread all over the place like a battlefield strewn with corpses of the freshly killed. (B 107)

In contrast with his compatriot Chenjerai Hove, the writing of Dambudzo Marechera, sometimes dubbed the African Kafka, is cynical, streetwise, absurdist, and determinedly experimental and cosmopolitan. For these reasons, even two decades on from his death at the age of 35 in 1987, his reputation remains controversial. Although his language is often highly wrought and allusive, he has no interest in bending metaphor in service of the nation, however illusory the nation is imagined to be. Marechera, who like Hove grew up in a country 'sick with the Rhodesian crisis', was set on avoiding what he called the 'ghetto daemon' of his mother-tongue Shona for his art, and disparaged a Hove-like resuscitation of oral resources.<sup>26</sup> Misrepresented as aspiring to write 'white', he was, however, as concerned as is Hove with the internal lives of 'unsung', ordinary Africans, even if these were interpreted mainly as versions of himself.<sup>27</sup> To evoke these lives he 'brutalised', as he said, the 'racist', 'male' English language, with which he paradoxically felt comfortable, into bearing the burden of his 'normal condition', grinding childhood poverty in Rusape township, and the later miseries of homelessness in Europe and in urban Zimbabwe.<sup>28</sup> Even his work produced in England is presciently imbued with disgust not only at the social prejudices of Europe and its colonial sidekick, Rhodesia, but at the violence and exploitation of post-1980 Zimbabwe, its dog-eat-dog *danses macabre*.

Marechera published two books during the time he spent in England, *The House of Hunger* (1978) and *Black Sunlight* (1980), that reflect largely on the internal conflicts he experienced from early childhood, the dilemmas of 'colonised consciousness', and his alienated situation as a black 'colonial' artist claiming international precursors.<sup>29</sup> This reading will, however, concentrate on *Mindblast* (1984), a collection of three short plays, a nightmarish sequence, poems and a fragment of autobiography, which, against many odds, not least its perceived 'difficulty', was the first book he published after his return home.<sup>30</sup> Although the collection is mainly preoccupied with a nihilistic or modernist concern to 'blast' social and aesthetic norms, its fragmentary structure allows Marechera to engage directly at certain points with the condition of newly post-independent Zimbabwe.

It is clear from as early as *The House of Hunger* that Marechera's work, much of it contradictory and internally tortured, is torn at base by two now overlapping, now divergent debates. Both press in upon *Mindblast* also. First, there is his existentialist concept of himself as an artist in quest of his own particular truth, distorting reality in order to fit that truth, and resisting the claims of state, language or belief. Second, despite the fact that he wrote self-consciously as an African, there is his quarrel with the conventional idea of the African writer as a socially responsible realist, especially with the 'committed' form this took in the new Zimbabwe, as elsewhere (*M* 52). It was Marechera's powerful contention that after Fanon, and after European modernism, African writers

could not avoid relaying the distorted and distorting shapes of the psyche in their art, of translating the world whether postcolonial or metropolitan as nauseating horror. He described this process as a confrontation with the skeleton in one's own cupboard, that is, oneself. 'I don't know whether the writer can offer the emerging nation anything,' he wrote, 'there must always be a healthy tension between a writer and his nation'.<sup>31</sup> When Marechera returned to his home country after nearly a decade abroad it was to find that *Black Sunlight* had been (temporarily) banned on the grounds of obscenity. Therefore, although he had once seen writing as a way of fighting for freedom, a type of guerrilla action, he now became prone to seeing the new nation, like the old, as a travesty and a prison, darkened by disillusionment. 'I have no ear for slogans . . . I run when it's A LUTA [CONTINUA] time'.<sup>32</sup>

In Marechera's clear-sighted, if not prophetic view, the postcolonial state depends for its existence on arbitrary violence and an economics of rabid extraction – in other words, Mbembe's *commandement*. As the playlets in *Mindblast* in particular make clear, Zimbabwe is no exception in this regard. Echoing Ngugi, the first African writer he encountered, Marechera observes: 'The black inheritors had not changed [the capital city] – just the name' (*M* 51). From this he concludes that all revolutions must inevitably lead to the 'alienation' of artists, as the artist's compulsion is to expose the true nature of the state (*M* 58). Framing rhetorical questions that could well stand as an epigraph to the entire *Mindblast* collection, Alfie, the Marechera surrogate in the playlet *Blitzkrieg*, asks, 'Ah, Zimbabwe, what are you doing to me? Zimbabwe, what am I doing to you?' (*M* 37) The words form part of a soliloquy, yet Alfie is in reality addressing himself to the toilet. As this backhandedly implies, the artist's work of exposure is both repellent and imperative. The postcolony or neocolonial nation has embedded itself in recuperative, Negritude-style illusions even while simultaneously compromising its principles of socialist redistribution by retaining colonial and capitalist hierarchies constructed on similar lines to those in, for instance, apartheid South Africa (*M* 26, 29–42).<sup>33</sup>

Whereas, as was seen earlier, Hove and Okri are especially concerned to investigate the make-up of the nation's regime of unreality, to dissect how the postcolony both embellishes and literalises communal symbols, it is Marechera's intention to strip such camouflaging figures away. He lays bare the general lack of symbolic proportion for what it is, while at the same time representing his many alter-egos as themselves victims of 'phantoms' or as living, breathing nightmares, demonstrating how pervasive these in fact are (*M* 54–5).<sup>34</sup> As in the *Grimknife* sequence (*M* 43–72), institutionalised violence obliterates the boundaries between the private and the public. The citizen is merely s/he who does what s/he is told by the powers that be, who mouths 'patriotism, loyalty and responsibility' (*M* 45, 54). Brute authority is stamped upon the suffering body and the grotesque is everywhere naturalised. In the

play *Blitzkrieg* the white businessman-politician Drake intones with deeply resonant irony: 'I cannot afford to forget the dreams of the great, for in them are the secrets of a nation's destiny' (M 33). The 'great' are, however, 'African mutants in transition' (M 97).

That said, it is important that Marechera does not in fact repudiate the *ideal* of the independent nation. On the contrary, he uses the nation as a space of potential in which to 'weave [his] own descriptions of reality into the available fantasy we call the world', as is clear from the journal extract in *Mindblast* written during a period of sleeping rough in Harare's Cecil Square (M 119–59). At the same time, in terms of its practical application in postcolonial Zimbabwe, the nation is experienced as an unending charade, an excessive and inescapable performance, and, from the artist's point of view, as psychological *agon*: 'Fatrigh, thinpoor – Power's gravy over the same rotting carcass' (M 76). Especially in Marechera's *Mindblast* poems, external urban reality takes on a quality of random accumulation, in which everything bears the same commercial valency, while also seeming distorted, denatured. Nothing is more prominent or significant than anything else, other than the artist's utterance perhaps, rushing out in a 'ghoulish mixture' of 'blood-clotting vomit' (M 72; see also 'The bar-stool edible worm' and 'The footnote to Hamlet', M 96–7). Marechera's Zimbabwe, classically pictured as a prostitute, is generally to be found 'in beerhalls and she-beens . . . selling the last bits and pieces of her soured vision' (M 106–7).

### Conclusion: postcolonial nightmare

If Marechera's disengagement from the nation is marked by disillusionment, cynicism is the keynote of Okri's post-/national phantasmagoria. The Nigerian writer could indeed be read as *dramatising* in his fiction Mbembe's theory of the postcolony. (The *vice versa* case, too, applies.) As in Mbembe's depiction, the fantastical aspects of lived existence in the postcolony can in Okri appear completely to detach characters' experience from the dimensions of a recognisably real world, although in a way that Okri, unlike Mbembe, might contend has spiritual plausibility. This chapter will end with a more detailed discussion of Okri's early dystopian work, as it is in these texts, perhaps more intensively so than in the work of his contemporaries, that the unavoidable metaphoricality of national (and, to him, all other) being is enacted.

In Okri, more pessimistically than in Hove, and in language more ornately figural than Marechera's, the predominant political atmosphere is one either of horrified amazement, such as is expressed in *The Famished Road*, or of the befuddled resignation of the protagonist in the title story 'Stars of the new curfew'.<sup>35</sup> In his bleak if colourful worlds, where those who proclaim integrity are the most corrupt of all, the plain, almost proverbial truths of nationalism – the idea of history as embodying the integrity of a people, the willingness of

that people to come together as one – are exposed as nonsense. In the story ‘The city of red dust’, Okri uncovers the destitution suffered by Nigeria’s burgeoning urban underclass, a destitution intimately and outrageously bound up with the wealth and power of the governing elite with which it is juxtaposed. The close juxtaposition of the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor in *The Famished Road* similarly points to the disastrous parasitism which marks contemporary politics. The pathology of contemporary national society, it seems, is not to be comprehended except partially, under the flickering light of magical vision and through the medium of gnomonic narrative.

As Okri represents it, the life of the Nigerian urban underclass is a cut-throat game of chance and multiple risk-taking generated by superstitions and rival cult wisdoms to the difficult end of surviving chaos. The only enduring truth of this society seems to be the inevitability of recurring defeat and dogged endurance. The stakes in the game of survival are, unsurprisingly, extremely high. Arthur in ‘Stars of the new curfew’, for example, is a small-time charlatan and seller of quack medicines. His cures are designed to inhibit disease and chaos merely by creating more problems and aggravating social disorder (*SNC* 87–8, 89). Blood, the fluid of life, when donated, becomes one of the few ways for the unemployed and poor to obtain a regular source of income, yet donation in effect only impoverishes them further. The Dad figure in *The Famished Road*, too, is described as driving himself beyond all conceivable human limits, carrying leaden cement bags in order to make a living, and later, pitting himself against ever larger and more supernaturally powerful boxing opponents.

When in ‘Stars of the new curfew’ the mountebank Arthur’s boss invents a new potion, an aphrodisiac panacea or ‘Power-Drug’, it is billed as salving all the ‘afflictions of the poor’ (*SNC* 98), as being a national cure-all, a kit to national salvation. The logo on the package is an index to the drug’s illusionary promise. It features the triad of an African nuclear family: a strong-arm wrestler as patriarchal figure, the ‘generalised face of a beautiful African woman’, and a child. The narrative has grown wise to nationalist fantasies, the hollow symbol of the cohesive male-led national family, to grand illusions packaged as national cures. Significantly, when Arthur is involved in a bus accident while selling ‘Power-Drug’, a ‘nationalist’ on board, a Rastafarian who denounces the betrayal of African independence, is exposed as a fraud – his dreadlocks are false. This moment registers the depth of Okri’s cynicism: nothing is so real as state-led and -abetted deception, nothing so true as the delusion that exposes it, or the dream that provides a means of escape.

Hungry for sacrifices, lying in wait on the good, the bad and the unsuspecting, the predatory road of Okri’s novel *The Famished Road* ramifies crazily through a chaotic and mystically charged reality, implicating the destinies of multitudes, unravelling and reweaving their dreams.<sup>36</sup> Not merely a path of life, or the way of the poor, it is the spaghetti junction of various planes of

being, of dead, unborn and living, of spirits and ancestors. The road multiplies, reproduces itself, subdivides: it pullulates with mangled disproportionate bodies, mythical apparitions reminiscent of the stories of Amos Tutuola, manifestations of a world out of joint, of mysterious, inexorable corruptions. The spirit-child Azaro, a strangely knowing, second-sighted narrator who 'does time' on the road, retains the insights and the longings of the spirit realm and yet has chosen 'the liberty of limitations' by deciding to live in the human world (*FR* 487). Even so, as he is constantly tempted to give way to spirit beckonings and return to the state of being unborn, his road seems to have built into it a repeating loop, a break in the logic of reality into which he occasionally falls. There, he experiences the other fantastical dimensions of the road, its magical ramifications and expansions that are oddly both separate and yet in many ways indistinguishable from the distortions of the human world.<sup>37</sup>

One of the prominent personalities in *The Famished Road* is an eccentric photographer whose work exposes the odd juxtapositions and ugly poverty of family life in Azaro's compound: 'We all looked like celebrating refugees. We were cramped, and hungry, and our smiles were fixed. The room appeared to be constructed out of garbage and together we seemed a people who had never known happiness' (*FR* 91). The photographer's image-making activities, which plot unsuspected and even visionary correspondences in the midst of confusion, can be taken as an index of the work of the writers examined in this chapter, in particular in national contexts where images seem more real than reality. As I have tried to show, it is probably true to say of the postcolonial worlds evoked by Okri, Hove and even Marechera that, far from metaphors merely connoting reality, reality is perceived as always already an iconic display. If due to different impulses, ranging from the traditional through the magical to the modernist, human perception makes up a tissue of metaphors thickly embossed with dream-images. Moreover, as these different writers have demonstrated, this is taken as more or less the usual state of things. Daily life is full of bizarre conjunctures: stars that become words or gods or bones; white men with silver eyelashes who have the same otherworldly status as fetishes wearing dark glasses, four-headed beggars, spirits shrouded in sunflower flames holding blue mirrors over their heads (*FR* 456–7).

In the early years of independence, fiction, variously identified as historical or realistic, was deployed and shaped in the service of national politics. Now, increasingly, there has been a shift from realistic fact into self-reflexively symbolic fiction. Writers consciously render the troubled spirit or inner chaos of the nation in and as metaphor. Literary symbols – the compound bones metaphor in *Bones*, the mind blasted by contradictory images in Marechera, Okri's road – signify, in particular, emergent nations already fatally mired in delusion. While not discarding allegiance to the concept of the nation as such or indeed to their narrative craft, these writers query the nation's profligate fictiveness,

especially in situations where such effects are used at once to cover up and to propagate violence and corruption. In the face of the already constructed identity of the nation, symbolic narrative appears to offer a literary elite one of two possibilities. Either there is aesthetic redemption against the odds, as in Achebe and possibly in Hove, where narrative's shape-giving power is raised to a higher symbolic level in order to resuscitate the nation; or, as in Marechera and Okri, there is the dismantling of delusion through the effects of nightmarish deformation. As if holding up a distorting mirror, the novelist in the latter situation reflects back and exaggerates the state's own distorted self-imaginings.

### Notes

- 1 See Timothy Brennan, 'The national longing for form', in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 64.
- 2 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World – A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Press, 1986).
- 3 For his explication of these terms, see Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation', in Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, pp. 297–302; as well as pp. 122–3 in this book.
- 4 In the work of these writers, as defined by Ato Quayson in his reading of Tutuola, Soyinka and Okri, a 'will-to-identity' is expressed in mythic rather than in realist terms. See Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), p. 158. See also Christopher Warnes, 'Magical realism and the cultural politics of the postcolonial novel', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003.
- 5 The second title in the trilogy based on the adventures of the *abiku* Azaro, is *Songs of Enchantment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), the third, *Infinite Riches* (London: Phoenix House, 1998). Neither of the second two novels is as technically accomplished as *The Famished Road*, certainly not with respect to the framing of Azaro's alternative planes of being as *at once* fantastical and real. For an alternative interpretation of Okri as a questing spiritual romantic, see Robert Fraser, *Ben Okri* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 1992).
- 6 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 43–5.
- 7 See Ben Okri, 'Redreaming the world: an essay for Chinua Achebe', *Guardian* (9 August 1990), 23.
- 8 Harry Garuba, 'Explorations in animist materialism', *Public Culture*, 15:2 (Spring 2003), pp. 261–86.
- 9 Ben Okri, *Incidents at the Shrine* (London: Fontana, 1986), pp. 55, 107, 1–22.
- 10 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). See also his essay, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (Winter 2003), 11–40.
- 11 See Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, pp. 24, 57, 108.
- 12 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, pp. 31–2.

- 13 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 110.
- 14 For critical commentary on Mbembe's postcolony, see Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (eds), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1996).
- 15 As is well described in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 119–65.
- 16 Jean Franco, 'The nation as imagined community', in H. Aram Veesser (ed.) *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 205–6.
- 17 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), pp. 11–14.
- 18 See Steven Connor's succinct summary of these analogies in *The English Novel in History, 1950–1995* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 44. On the fictional aspects of national construction, see also the introduction, pp. 10–11.
- 19 As Régis Debray, Benedict Anderson and Timothy Brennan, among others, have pointed out, nationalism carries a strong symbolic or ritualistic dimension and relies on religious modes of thought. These would include the idea of an apocalyptic or momentous birth, and beliefs in national redemption and in history as the act of manifestation of a chosen people. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms* [1983] rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991); Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
- 20 See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, rev. edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 2–3.
- 21 Chenjerai Hove, *Bones* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988). Page references will henceforth be quoted in the text together with the abbreviation *B*. For the reference to 'the divinity that controls remotely but diligently the transactions of the market-place that is [the] world', see Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. 102.
- 22 Hove quoted in Carita Backstrom, 'In search of psychological worlds: on Yvonne Vera's and Chenjerai Hove's portrayal of women', in Maria E. Baaz and Mai Palmberg (eds), *Same and Other: Negotiating African Identity in Cultural Production* (Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2001), p. 91. On Hove's intertextuality with Shona oral forms, see Dan Wylie, 'Language-thieves', *English in Africa*, 18:2 (1991), 39–62.
- 23 Caroline Rooney, 'Re-possession: inheritance and independence in Hove's *Bones* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', in Abdulrazak Gurnah (ed.), *Essays on African Writing: A Re-evaluation*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), pp. 119–43.
- 24 Such displacement should in theory unsettle the forbidding logic of historical recrimination and recurrence, of evil paid back by evil: 'To fight on is all right, but a good fighter knows when to postpone the fight for another day' (*B* 102).
- 25 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 123. I am grateful to Ranka Primorac for discussion about the static chronotopes of peasant life in Hove's work.
- 26 Dambudzo Marechera, 'Thought-tracks in the snow', in *The House of Hunger* [1978] (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 144.
- 27 Dambudzo Marechera, *The Black Insider*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990), p. 109.
- 28 'Dambudzo Marechera interviews himself', in Flora Veit-Wild and Ernst Schade (eds), *Dambudzo Marechera 1952–1987* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1988), pp. 7–8.

- Biographical accounts of Marechera may also be found in: Robert Fraser, *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2002), pp. 45–7; Flora Veit-Wild, ‘Introduction’ in Marechera, *The Black Insider*, pp. 5–22. For his internal struggles with language, see also *The House of Hunger*, pp. 30–1. For a discussion of Marechera’s work as self-critically autobiographical, see: Melissa Levin and Laurice Taitz, ‘Fictional autobiographies/autobiographical fictions’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32:1 (1997), pp. 103–15.
- 29 For an insightful account of Marechera as a spokesman for colonised disenchantment, see Abdulrazak Gurnah, ‘“The mid-point of the scream”: the writing of Dambudzo Marechera’, in Gurnah (ed.), *Essays*, pp. 100–18.
- 30 Dambudzo Marechera, *Mindblast* [1984] (Harare: The College Press, 1989). Page references will henceforth be cited in the text along with the abbreviation *M*.
- 31 Marechera, ‘Beneath reality there is always fantasy’, in Veit-Wild and Schade (eds), *Dambudzo Marechera*, pp. 10–11. See also p. 19.
- 32 Marechera, ‘Beneath reality’, p. 30. And see *M* 62.
- 33 See also, for example, *The Black Insider*, pp. 80–1.
- 34 And see Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 119.
- 35 Ben Okri, *Stars of the New Curfew* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1988), pp. 25–79, 81–144. Page references will henceforth be cited in the text together with the abbreviation *SNC*.
- 36 Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Cape, 1991). Page references will henceforth be quoted in the text together with the abbreviation *FR*.
- 37 The road in these guises joins up with the road of Wole Soyinka’s play of that exact name, *The Road* (1965). Its god is Ogun, the god of road accidents, destruction and transitions, the deity who governs in Soyinka’s words ‘the dark continuum of transition where occurs the inter-transmutation of essence-ideal and materiality’. See Wole Soyinka, *The Road*, in *Collected Plays I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); and *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 26–7.