

The Born-Translated African Novel in English, Translation, and the Space of and for African Literature

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1. Introduction

African novels in English have always experimented in different ways with the creation of a hybrid language, through code-switching, interlanguage and, more extensively, translation. They straddle the realms of literature and orature, as they translate the latter into the former, carving out a space in-between Standard English and the African languages translated into English. As Ibironke argues, "African writers are necessarily translators, in that the distinction between 'source' and 'target' are constantly interlocked and interchanging" (2003: 112). In a sense then, African novels in English are born-translated, and as they foreground the multilingualism of the African realities and incorporate translation within their compositional process, they seem to anticipate the peculiar characteristics that R. Walkowitz (2015) finds in the contemporary novels of the globalized publishing market.

By borrowing the concept of born-digital, Walkowitz defines the born translated novel of the new millennium as a literary work written in English that builds

translation into its form and that is written, right from the start, for being simultaneously published in translations to other languages (2015). Highlighting the novelty and originality of the born-translated novels of the new millennium, Walkowitz points out that the ways in which these deal with languages other than English are far different from the ways in which the novels of the twentieth century treated foreign languages. While the latter often incorporated untranslated foreign vocabulary within the body of the text, the contemporary born translated novels, rather than simply embedding the foreign language, include the listener's reception of the foreign language within the narration itself. The born translated novel thus has a peculiar way of emphasizing multilingualism, by narrating the effect of hearing a foreign speech on the listener.

As the linguistic diversity disappears below the surface of an essentially monolingual text, according to Walkowitz, the born-translated novels of the globalized era remove the obstacles to translation by anticipating it, whereas the multilingual novels of the twentieth-century, because of their interpolation of different languages that evoke very localized and often unique cultural references, used to make the task of the translator more difficult. As a product of the globalized market of literature, within which they are required to appear simultaneously in different languages, the born-translated novels seem to be conceived out of a particular concern for their translatability; a concern that has to be understood precisely in relation to the demands of the market. Being so conceived to be distributed beyond linguistic and national borders, following Walkowitz's argument, the born-translated novels cannot be said to fit one language and one nation, and thus break the relationship between language of composition and national culture, between native and foreign literature and readership. Conceptualized in such terms, the born-translated novel allows Walkowitz to offer a revised notion of "world literature", in which translation is not a secondary craft that grants access to "foreign" literatures, but is rather a vital component of the writer's creative process. Whereas a modernist notion of world literature coincided with a sum of many national literatures, and translation was the bridge between these self-contained national literary traditions, the born-translated novel breaks the logic that align language and nation.

However, and most importantly, it is evident that the globalized market favors, first of all, English, the language of the cosmopolitanism of the globalized era. The logic of removing obstacles to international comprehension and the translatability that underpins the creation of the born-translated novel is clearly asymmetrical, as it is, ultimately, a matter of subsuming different languages into English, while at the same time facilitating the translation of a literary work to other languages of national and international currency for which there is a viable publishing market. It seems, then, that the cosmopolitanism of “world” literature and its “global” circulation are underpinned by the same imperialist logics that grants English its global dominance¹, and, in this sense, it has been argued that the global status of a literary work may arguably come at the cost of standardization (Mufti 2016). Surely it comes at the expense of the exclusion of languages that do not fit within a space that is ultimately defined by the cultural and economic logics of the globalized market.

The same logic has dictated the conditions for the production and international circulation of the African novel, right from the early days of its canonization, up until the present era. Three decades ago, Mloma (1990), arguing in favor of an African literature that reached out to the masses, observed that a very long and complex chain of prejudice had constrained the growth of independent publishing infrastructures for an African literature in African languages, and remarked that a market for the circulation of a literature in African languages could only exist and thrive if African languages were granted an equitable space alongside the colonial European languages. Pointing out that “[l]imited and inadequate publishing and distribution systems have kept the audience of African writers very small” (Mloma 1990: 13), she remarked that the foreign-dependent structure in which the African economies and the publishing market with it had been trapped ultimately made the choice of English a near-necessary choice for the African writers of the former British colonies. This state of affairs has hardly changed, as recent reviews on the subject of publishing in African languages highlights (Zell 2018). Compelled by a series of structural constraints to write in English, the African authors have

¹ According to the latest UNESCO “Index Translationum” statistics, more than twice as many works have been translated from English alone than from French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese taken together.

been led to engage with self-translation, whenever their literary representation demanded adherence to the peculiarities of the socio-linguistic space of Africa. The incorporation of translation into the narrative and the very expedient of narrating the effects of an alien speech on the listener, that Walkowitz recognizes as a peculiarity of the born-translated novels of the new millennium, are certainly not new to the African novel in English. In brief, African novels in English have had to be born-translated, and while their choice of language responded to the need to carve out a space for Africa in the realm of western 'world' literature, through self- and pre-emptive translation, a number of African authors explored ways to forge an authentically African English expression.

While the hybridization of English resulting from translation of African indigenous languages is meant to allow writers to preserve a sense of authenticity with regard to their literary representations, the appropriation of the colonial language has nevertheless always been a controversial issue. This language issue cuts across the theoretical divide between the aesthetic and the political that is found in postcolonial scholarship (Krishnan 2014). That is to say, regardless of whether the literary worth of an author's work has been judged either by its political function – the writing back – or by its aesthetic value – the recuperation of a lost pre-colonial heritage – the language of African literature has always had a central significance in its critical reception. The question of the status, role and functions of English and the other colonial languages, as opposed to the indigenous African languages, has been the object of a long-standing and ongoing debate that interrogates the social and political role of African writers and their art, thus transcending the domain of literature to intersect with issues of literacy, education and citizenship.

On one side of the debate are the African writers who defend their use of English and claim their right to be part of a world literature. In their view, the role of literature seems to be divorced from wider political concerns for social empowerment and development. This position is exemplified by Chinua Achebe, who greatly contributed to the creation of a Nigerian literary English. Writers on the other side of the language debate hold instead a radically different view of the pedagogical and political role of literature, as they perceive the choice to write in English as a betrayal of the cause of emancipation from colonial dominance. An

ideal of a civic literature based on the idea that aesthetic concerns cannot be divorced from political commitment has been repeatedly voiced by, among others, the celebrated Kenyan scholar and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

Translation, in both its capacities as a trans-cultural practice, and a necessary condition for an expanded readership, is at the heart of the language debate and plays a key role in defining the space of and for African literature. For the purpose of discussing the role of translation in defining a space of and for African literature, this paper focuses on three authors, each located in a different socio-cultural context, and each representing a distinct generation and a different approach to the representation of Africa in and through the English language.

Achebe, with his three early novels, also known as the *African Trilogy* (*Things Fall Apart* (TFA), *No Longer at Ease* (NLE), *Arrow of God* (AOG)), published between 1958 and 1964, represents the first generation of African writers whose emergence accompanied the rise of the postcolonial intellectual vanguard that assumed the task of subverting the colonial mindset, at a time when literary studies were perceived – or perceived themselves – to be the central agents in the process of the continental uplift (Amoko 2010). Commonly referred to as the “Makerere” generation, it comprises the writers who met at the homonymous University in Kampala, in 1962, for the first Conference of African Writers of English Expression, where the language debate was sparked off.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a writer-activist who believed that literature should be taken to the streets. His picaresque novel of the Biafran Civil War, *Sozaboy* (SOZ), published in Nigeria in 1985, represents a unique and politically charged linguistic experiment that marks a radical break from the born-translated novels of the first generation of African writers.

Uzodinma Iweala is a contemporary American author of Nigerian descent who followed in Saro-Wiwa's footsteps, with his novel *Beasts of No Nation* (BNN), published in 2005. With BNN, a “global” text in terms of its conditions of production and reception, Iweala depicts an image of Africa that sets him apart from both the other authors, as he negotiates the aesthetic need for authenticity with the demands and expectations of an international humanitarian readership.

2. The African Trilogy: Achebe's translational experimentation and the creation of a Nigerian literary English

Chinua Achebe was arguably the most prominent advocate of the use of English for African literature and he repeatedly claimed his right to own the English language, ever since the Makerere Conference. A lot has been written on the language of Achebe's novels. The literature on the subject is extensive and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss it in detail; only brief reference is made to his African Trilogy, the early novels in which Achebe first developed his unique style.

Achebe thought that the African writer should "aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his personal experience" (Achebe 1975: 100), and by experimenting with translation he was able to infuse his literary English with a peculiar Igbo inflection, thus *Africanizing* the language of colonial inheritance, while also preserving its international intelligibility. In his well-known essay "The African Writer and the English Language" (1975: 91-103) he illustrates this point by quoting a passage from his own novel AOG and juxtaposing it to its version in a more 'standard' English prose, one which, in his own words, is not "in character" (1975: 102). Let us consider the following clauses from AOG's passage: "I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. [...] The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (1975: 101); and compare them to their "standardized" version he himself offers in the same essay: "I am sending you as my representative among these people [...] one has to move with the times or else one is left behind" (1975: 102). As the comparison clearly shows, it is a matter of lexical choices and rhetorical figures, which in turn evoke a different set of images, yet there is no doubt that the English-speaking readers will find themselves at home even with the metaphors and imagery of Achebe's Africanized English. Precisely for this characteristic, Achebe's English also courted and facilitated translation to other languages. TFA, for instance, the novel that consecrated his talent, was translated into 45 languages, making Achebe the most translated African author of all time.

Praised by Biakolo for his “felicitous transliteration of Igbo ideas” (1995: 393), in the novels of his Trilogy Achebe performed a multiple act of translation: from Igbo to English, from orature to literature and from the localized audience of Igbo orature to a transnational English-proficient readership. With TFA, for the first time, the Igbo culture and language are given literary legitimacy. However, in the novel, only few words, relating to food items, cultural artifacts, customs and deities, and some ritual expressions, for all of which there can be no translation without any significant loss of meaning, are preserved in the Igbo language and code-mixed within the morpho-syntax of Standard English. A glossary providing an explanation is also added, to orient and facilitate the reader and, obviously, the translator. On the other hand, the voice of the peasants, the traditional folk tales populated by heroes and gods and the many proverbs with which Achebe enriched his prose are all translated; so that, in the end, the indigenous linguistic diversity of Igboland is subsumed into and refracted through the English voice of the narrator-translator. In an episode of TFA that sees the first encounter between a white missionary with his interpreter and the Igbo people, Achebe also provides an example of the narration of linguistic diversity that Walkowitz finds typical of the born-translated novels of the new millennium; a white missionary arrives at the village of Mbanta with an Igbo interpreter from the Delta whose speech habit gives rise to misunderstandings and provokes laughter among the villagers:

He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying “myself” he always said “my buttocks”². (TFA: 102)

In the other novels of the trilogy, NLA and AOG, the narrator performs a similar role of translator; although in these novels no glossary is added, the narrating voice provides a paraphrase of the Igbo words or expressions which are interspersed in the English morpho-syntax. What distinguishes NLA and AOG from TFA is the presence of Pidgin English. AOG is the third novel of the Trilogy

² “Instead of the personal pronoun *mu* (I, me) the Delta Igbo use the term the term *ike-mu* (my buttocks/my ass) and instead of *gi* (you), they say *ike-gi* (your ass)” (Jemie 2003: 20-21).

but it is the second in terms of the chronology of colonialism that the entire Trilogy retraces, with its depiction of the establishment of colonial administration in 1920s Igboland. In those years, when the events depicted in the novel take place, a Pidgin English variety was beginning to make inroads in Igboland as the link language used by the native *Kotma*, the court messengers from the coastal regions hired by the British to translate to and from the indigenous languages. Along with the use of eye dialect to represent the Igbo people's non-standard pronunciation of the colonial overseer's name – "Wintabota" – the use of Pidgin records a crucial change in the sociolinguistic space of West Africa, its emergence as a contact language representing the nativization of English at a grassroots level. Little wonder the use of Pidgin is far more frequent in NLE, which is set in the late 1950s urban context of a Lagos that is witnessing the rise of its future postcolonial ruling class. Used by lower-class characters and juxtaposed to the main characters' standard English, with the aim of contrasting their social trajectories, it symbolizes the social relationships of power that are established in and through language. Interestingly, Pidgin is consciously used as a marked choice in code-switching with English by one of the leading characters:

Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of the most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in thus coming to terms with a double heritage. (NLAE: 238)

Once again, rather than being simply represented, multilingualism is narrated, and the social and cultural resonances of the interpolation of Pidgin within the standard English text are made explicit.

With AOG, Achebe's Igbo-inflected literary English arguably reached its full expression. In this novel, as in TFA, the vivid imagery of the highly figurative Igbo language, the proverbs and local idioms, which are all translated to English, do not deviate from the accepted standard norm in such a way as to compromise the intelligibility of a language which, for its style, nevertheless resonates with the rhythmic cadence of Igbo storytelling.

Achebe firmly believed in English as the only language in Nigeria that could represent a national sentiment that rose above ethnic partiality. This view he

made explicit at a time when the search for Nigerian nationhood was at the center of the intellectual debate: “A national literature is one that takes the whole nation for its province, and has a realized or potential audience throughout its territory. In other words a literature that is written in the national language” (1975: 56). It is easy to see how Achebe’s experimentation with translation responds to his need to project the Igbo experience onto a superior national level and avoid the risk of ethnic particularism. English in Nigeria is officially the national language, and, in Adebija’s words, is a “domesticated” English, as it has been “adapted and tamed to suit the Nigerian environment” (2004: 20). Achebe thus paved the way for an entire generation of writers who contributed to the creation of a Nigerian literary English. These authors forged what has been referred to as “Ninglish”, that is, an English that responds to the “local imagery, figures of speech, sound patterns and the general cultural milieu of the region” (Owolabi 2012: 489).

It must be stressed that Ninglish, unlike Nigerian Pidgin English, which has developed organically in the urban communities and is a vehicular language that cuts through ethnicity and class, is only a literary reality, an artificial language that has its origin in Standard British English. As much as this literary English responded to the need to adhere to the African realities, it was also the obvious and necessary choice of language for the Nigerian writers who aimed at reaching an international audience and claim their right to find validation within the western literary circles. As the quoted passage from AOG above shows, Ninglish does not deviate from the morpho-syntax of Standard English; its peculiarities lie in the rhetorical choices of the author and the imagery he draws on. In other words, Achebe exoticized English while translating and also narrating the linguistic diversity of Igboland. Achebe’s generation’s “writing back”, as much as it stemmed from the need to counter the colonial discourse that had disparaged the indigenous cultures and languages and portrayed Africa as an indistinct “darkness”, also responded to a desire to confront the colonists on their own ground and thus prove that the colonized were by no means inferior or incapable of reaching the same artistic heights as the canonized masters of English literature. As their work could only reach a minority of Africans, the literate and English-proficient educated élite, Achebe and the writers of his generation wrote mainly for an international western public.

3. Ngũgĩ: a literature for the Africans and the key role of translation

If Achebe saw no contradiction between the use of English and his concern for cultural assertion, from the other side of the language debate, writing in the European language was judged as unnatural and artificial. Looking back at the Makerere Conference, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in his famous essay "The Language of African Literature", argued that the self-translated African writers had "created, falsely and even absurdly, an English-speaking [...] African peasantry and working class" (1986: 22), existing only in fiction and invested with the mentality and the dilemmas of the intellectual class caught in-between the world of their colonial education and that of their native communities.

The contrast between the artificiality of Achebe's literary English and the spontaneity of the West African Pidgins underpins Ngũgĩ's argument against English. Throughout his career Ngũgĩ has reiterated his point that English is irremediably alien to the peoples of Africa who are positioned outside elitedom, since it has little or no part in their everyday life, and his argument against the use of English in literature has always coincided with a need to reconnect the intellectual class to the masses. By supporting the use of the indigenous languages, he has always championed an ideal of a literary citizenship based on African tradition, in the belief that an aesthetic education is instrumental to establishing a national and, through translation, a pan-African post-colonial culture. His championing of the African indigenous languages is not so much a concern for some sort of linguistic and cultural purism, as it is a concern for the social and political role of literature, in the perspective of an endogenous development of the African communities and their emancipation from the perpetuation of neo-colonial forms of dominance.

Translation thus plays a key role, in Ngũgĩ's perspective; a literature in the indigenous African languages must necessarily depend on it, in order to boost its own circulation within a highly complex multilingual continent. In his recent contribution on the topic of the politics of translation, Ngũgĩ defined translation as "the universal language of languages" (2018: 131), and, as such, he believes it represents the major challenge to the orthodoxy of monolingualism of colonial and elitist culture. Lying at the root of Ngũgĩ's long-running argument, one

problem with the born-translated novels in English is that they can only circulate within the closed circles of the intellectual elites and thus cannot support the development of a local literary culture. Also, if their language represents a subversion of the ideology of the native speaker-standard English, it also eventually restates the colonial ideology of monolingualism that sees the indigenous languages as ethnically divisive.

4. Murdering English: Nigerian Pidgin

A discussion of the opposing views of Achebe and Ngũgĩ cannot avoid taking account of the substantial differences that exist between the Nigerian and the Kenyan sociolinguistic contexts. Achebe's novels come in a long line of an evolving historicity of the English language in Nigeria, which has resulted in English being nativized in a continuum of forms, from the Standard native-speaker variety of the educated elite – which provided the basis for Nigerian literary English – to the grassroots spread of a Pidgin variety, which had spontaneously emerged way before the English language was imposed on the native population. On the contrary, in the Eastern colony, English was forcibly introduced without having first had the opportunity to come in sustained contact with any of the local languages; as a result, no mixed language of the likes of Nigerian Pidgin had developed before the mid-twentieth century.

Most importantly, as Jeyifo argues, in Nigerian popular culture, English “has produced a rich and extensive discursive order of playful, ironic or ludic meta-commentary on the very idea of its being foreign” and the main attraction of many Nigerian TV and radio shows, for decades, has been “the colourful murder of the English language”. (2018: 139) Nigerian Pidgin is at the heart of this tradition, and by drawing on it, Ken Saro-Wiwa offered notable examples, in prose writing as well as in drama, radio and television, of how to murder the English language without having to resort to indigenous languages.

5. Taking literature to the streets: *Sozaboy's Rotten English*

Ken Saro-Wiwa followed a radically different path from Achebe and drew on the real language that is found in the sociolinguistic space of Nigeria to fashion out his *Sozaboy's "Rotten English"* (1985: Author's note). Rotten English is the result of a sophisticated experiment with self-translation; it is a disarticulate, disconnected and unstable interlanguage, a complex heteroglossia in which the entire cline of English language usages in Nigeria is refracted, from Pidgin to Standard English. It reflects the wavering and short-of-target linguistic competence of Mene the Sozaboy, a poorly educated schoolboy who narrates his own picaresque wanderings through a land devastated by civil war in the fashion of an autobiographical fiction. Rotten English represents a radical transgression of the native speaker-standard norm, and it might not be immediately comprehensible to the reader who is not familiar with Pidgin, some of whose most typical characteristics are featured in the passage that follows: the existential copula "dey", the focus marker "na" in the cleft sentence, the multifunctional preposition "for", the adverbial "sef" for "even", the tense marker "don" and the use of the reduplication.

And something was very bad for that place, you know. Water to drink no dey. Common well sef, you cannot get. [...] Na the same water that we are bathing and using to wash some of our clothes. And na the same water we were using for cooking. [...] Even when we cook, na sozaman we dey cook. Just throw water, salt, pepper and small fish for pot at the same time. Otherwise, always small biscuit and tea for inside mess pan without sugar or anything. Christ Jesus, man picken don suffer well well. (91)

By narrating the civil war from the viewpoint of a semi-literate young boy of Ogoniland, Saro-Wiwa reverses the perspective and shocks the cosmopolitan English-speaking reader who may no longer feel at home in the chaos of Rotten English. To Mene the Sozaboy and the Ogoni people, English, the "big grammar", is a foreign language:

The man with the shirt stood up. And begin to talk in English. Big big words. Grammar. "Fantastic. Overwhelming. Generally. In particular and in general". Haba. God no vex. But he did not stop there. The big grammar continued. "Odious. Destruction. Fighting". I understand that one. "Henceforth. General mobilization. All citizens. Able-bodied. Join the military. His excellency. Power conferred on us. Volunteers. Conscription". Big big words. Long long

grammar. "Ten heads. Vandals. Enemy". Everybody was silent. Everywhere was silent like burial ground. Then they begin to interpret all that long grammar plus big big words in Kana. In short what the man is saying is that all those who can fight will join army. (46-47)

Unlike Achebe, Saro-Wiwa was apparently not particularly concerned with the international intelligibility and therefore with the translatability and the global circulation of his novel, as *Sozaboy's* language responded to the need to confer authenticity to the novel's fiction and the author's desire to act as speaker for the Ogoni people. As a writer-activist, "Ken Saro-Wiwa was guided by a fundamental philosophy of the role and responsibility of the intellectual in confronting injustice. Specifically, Saro-Wiwa believed that literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria's [...] must play an interventionist role" (Pegg 2000: 703). What distinguished Saro-Wiwa from

activist writers across the world [who], however, often suffer from audiences that comprise only a relatively tiny group of educated elites, was his belief that the writer must reach the grassroots level and take part in the political struggles of the masses. (*Ibid.*: 704)

Mene's Rotten English functions both as a lens in which the multiple voices of the Biafran sociolinguistic space converge, and as a prism that refracts a heteroglossia in which also Khana, the indigenous language of the Ogoni, is absorbed and translated. Despite the indigenous language's disappearance from direct speech, the power imbalance that derives from the hierarchical relationship between the central Government, the elite with their "big grammar", and the marginalized people with their dominated unofficial language is nevertheless preserved. Together with the choice of a fictitious setting and an unnamed people, the choice of translating Khana into Rotten English corresponds to an ethnically neutral choice on the part of the author. By drawing on Pidgin, itself a trans-ethnic link language, the language of *Sozaboy* crosses the ethnic and linguistic barriers of Nigeria and allows his author to oppose all the parties involved in the Biafran civil war. By transposing the plight of the Ogoni people onto a fictional level and concurrently translating the real people's indigenous language speech into an authentically non-standard, pidgin-inflected pan-Nigerian variety of English, Saro-Wiwa avoids the risk of being labeled as "tribal" or "ethnic" and, therefore, of characterizing his novel in this sense. Through his

Rotten English, Saro-Wiwa has offered us the view of “a Nigeria that is not divided along ethnic and linguistic lines” and he “allows Sozaboy to contradict, to speak against, the civil war at the level of form” (North 2001: 109). Rotten English is therefore an authentic language that balances the need to overthrow the language ideologies inherited from colonialism, on the one hand, and the need to maintain an ethnic neutrality on the other.

For all the very localized cultural and social connotations that are embedded in Rotten English, SOZ represents a quite unique work of literary art. Being conceived to project a very specific image of a region of Africa, caught in a particular time in history, Rotten English is a language that discourages its translation to other languages, especially those that, unlike the European colonial languages, have not come in sustained contact with the African multilingual reality and so have not developed link languages of the likes of Pidgin. Whereas for the French translation of SOZ the two translators from Burkina Faso, Samuel Millogo and Amadou Bissiri (Saro-Wiwa 1998), could draw on a genuinely African linguistic repertoire - first of all the French Pidgin and a number of typically African idiomatic phrases (Sévry 1998) - the Italian translation, for instance, (Saro-Wiwa 2005) rendered the original into a low colloquial register of what remains fundamentally a standard variety of Italian. Similarly, the challenge of translating SOZ to German has been discussed in terms of the difficulty of finding suitable linguistic equivalents to the wide cline of linguistic variation that characterizes the Nigerian sociolinguistic space and makes Sozaboy undetachable from it and its time in history (Adeaga 2008).

6. Beasts of No Nation: the image of Africa in “global” literature

Although with *Beasts of No Nation*, Uzodinma Iweala clearly followed in Saro-Wiwa’s footsteps, the contexts in which the two novels were conceived and circulated, could not be more different. Whereas Saro-Wiwa was directly involved in grassroots activism in Ogoniland – a commitment that would cost him his life – and wrote mainly for a Nigerian readership, Iweala developed his interest in the plight of the African child-soldiers as an undergraduate student at Harvard and

composed his novel in the context of the globalized publishing market. His ties to Nigeria nevertheless provided him with the opportunity to find genuine inspiration and, most of all, with the linguistic material through which to forge a voice for Agu, the child-soldier protagonist of his novel.

Agu narrates in first person his war picaresque in a broken English, the interlanguage of an African child whose education has been disrupted by the coming of war. However, Agu's language is far more polished and palatable to the western English-speaking reader than *Sozaboy's* Rotten English. Iweala limits the deviations from the standard English to very few code-mixed Pidgin expressions, the omission of the determiners, the use of reduplications and a sustained use of the continuous aspect of the verb. This, in turn, has the effect of giving a constant pace to Agu's narrative, which makes it rather easy for the reader to follow the child-soldier in his descent into the hell of war.

There is not enough gun for each person to be having one so I am not having gun. Anyway, Commandant is saying that I am too small to be carrying gun because small person is not holding gun well well and just bouncing up and down when they are shooting. Instead he is giving me knife. But everybody is getting gun juice. Everybody is always wanting gun juice because it is drug and making life easy easy. (54)

I was just in the market when I am hearing GBWEM! I am just hearing one blast and the ground began to shaking shaking. [...] I am hearing another GBWEM landing right next to me. And then I was feeling fire on my body but I wasn't burning. When I am looking up I am seeing people hanging from tree like piece of meat. Head just hanging like coconut before it is falling off. Ah ah. Na wah oh! (97)

Iweala avoids the abrupt changes of rhythm and the inconsistencies that challenge the reader of *Sozaboy* to keep up with Mene as he trudges through a war-torn land. Whereas *Sozaboy's* Rotten English is undetachable from the space-time frame of the Biafran conflict, it is only from the American viewpoint that Agu's language acquires its full significance, within the deficit perspective of the interlanguage. Lacking the multilayered social and cultural references embedded in Rotten English, Agu's interlanguage appears as nothing more than a Pidgin-inflected English that cuts across the West African sociolinguistic space and also preserves its intelligibility beyond the Atlantic.

BNN's happy ending, with Agu being rescued by an NGO and finding shelter in a rehabilitation center where he is delivered to the care of Amy, the American counsellor, epitomizes the journey of the novel itself, which was written for an international readership and perhaps not without thinking of its translation to other languages.

And everyday I am talking to Amy. She is white woman from America who is coming here to be helping people like me. Her teeth is too small and her tongue is too big for her mouth so she is speaking through her nose but her nose is too small so sometimes it is troubling me too much to be hearing what she is saying. (175)

For Agu, the American accent of the counsellor assigned to him to help him deal with the trauma of having been a child soldier sounds as a foreign language; as in Saro-Wiwa's novel, the perspective is reversed, although in the case of BNN the English speaking reader will hardly face the same hurdles presented by Sozaboy's Rotten English. For the characteristics of its language, BNN did not discourage its translation, and as a novel that avoids charging its language with too specific socio-geographical connotations, BNN is neither Nigerian nor American literature. It is a novel that aims to speak to a cosmopolitan humanitarian readership, and, although Agu's language represents a successful mediation between the demands of the global market and the need to forge an authentic African voice, Iweala's novel cannot avoid presenting the reader with a certain sanctioned vision of the continent.

In this sense, BNN may be placed besides those contemporary novels of Africa that "both challenge and are constrained by the conventions of representation mediating the reception of postcolonial literatures" (Krishnan 2014: 3-4). The popularity of the child-soldier narrative as a genre, in the end, depends on its adherence to a stereotypical image of Africa that confirms the western reader's expectations. As a child-soldier narrative aimed at raising awareness, BNN inevitably reproduces the common sense vision that is circulated across the West, of Africa as a place of suffering, born of misery, in perpetual crisis and in constant need of western intervention in order to be rescued from itself; BNN's image of Africa is that of a continent that, just like Agu, is a child that must be saved.

7. Conclusion

All three of the authors here referred to experiment with translation in order to find an authentic literary expression and, as a result, each forge, in and through language, a different literary space of and for Africa. If the born-translated novel of the new millennium does not fit exclusively one period, one nation and one language, on the contrary, a sense of place is preserved in Achebe's born-translated novels. Achebe laid the foundations for a Nigerian Literature of English expression and despite its monolingualism, which allowed his novels to reach an international readership, through his exercise in self-translation, he met the need to preserve an identity relationship between language and geography. Conversely, as he was not seeking validation of his work within Western literary circles, Saro-Wiwa was not concerned with the international currency of his novel's language. With *SOZ*, by challenging the existing norms of an already consolidated literary tradition and making full use of the sociolinguistic resources available to him, Saro-Wiwa was able to draw a very unique and localized image of Africa. Considering the localized peculiarities of Rotten English, and the difficulties it posed to its translation, one is led to ask whether *SOZ* would have received the same international attention if its author had not met his tragic and horrific fate. Two decades later, Iweala seems to have negotiated the need for authenticity with the demands of the publishing market. BNN's language is the product of this mediation and his image of Africa is a "global" one. It would however seem that, in order to capitalize on the western consumers' desire for sensationalized stories of African child-soldiers, Iweala was not able to avoid the risk of reverting to the stereotypical image of Africa typical of the child-soldier narrative genre.

It would then seem that in order to gain access to the "global" market of literature, monolingualism and a certain degree of standardization are required. What is more, the very meaning of "global" ought to be brought into question. The concept of "global" included in such terms as global market and global circulation of literature, just as the "world" in world literature, is predicated on a western-centric imperialist notion that excludes the periphery and disregards the languages that do not have currency within the West. Therefore, the apparent unity represented

in the concept of a post-national world literature seems still to be predicated on neo-colonial power relationships and linguistic hierarchies.

Language carries a symbolic charge that is an important component of individual and group identity; if African literature is loaded with the political agenda of emancipation from foreign domination, then the aesthetic question of authenticity is also loaded with ethical and political values. Self-translation, however, appears as an unstable ground. If, against all the barriers and constraints, African writers who chose to write in indigenous languages face the risk of being pushed to the sidelines of the publishing market and inevitably fail to reach a wide audience, the self-translated writers who aim to find a place within the global market run the risk of perpetuating the patterns of domination and the ideologies that have contributed to preventing the African peoples from finding a genuine expression of their own. It is to state the obvious to say that literature circulates in society not merely because of some kind of intrinsic merit, but because it is part of a market and, not secondarily, of the education system. Novels that translate Africa into English can circulate within a well-established book market that has its center outside the African continent, while, at the same time, the international currency afforded by the English language also courts their translation to other languages for which there is a profitable market. Therefore, if the born-translated African novels can easily reach a “global” audience, they can’t possibly assist in the task of contributing to the discursive formation that underpins the very idea of nationhood, if this has to find its roots in the Africans’ indigenous multilingualism.

Not only has the structural favoring of the languages of colonial inheritance in the countries of sub-Saharan continent, marginalized the indigenous African languages in education, but it has also prevented the development of a local publishing industry. As argued by Ngũgĩ, supporting translation from, between and also to the African languages, within a framework of equitable language policies, may represent a cohesive factor and contribute to the promotion of internal-driven development (2018). Translation is the key foundational principle for the feasibility of multilingual policies that see linguistic diversity as a resource for empowerment and development, whereas the colonial ideology of monolingualism tends to see translation as a problem, since it allegedly involves a cost that makes multilingualism not viable (Bamgboṣe 2011). The role that

literature can actually play in the process, however, remains to be investigated. The assumption on which Ngũgĩ's argument rests is that literature can foster citizenship and increase social and political awareness; what remains to be demonstrated is whether such a vision of literary citizenship is a realistic and attainable goal. Most importantly, with his clear and strong argument in support of translation as the intercultural practice *par excellence*, Ngũgĩ is implicitly voicing a need for a market for publishing and circulating African literature that may be independent from the constraints imposed by the neo-colonial logics of globalization. This has kept favoring the English language not only in the former colonies of the British Empire but throughout the world at large, where another language ideology has been spreading that represents English as a "global" de-territorialized and de-nativized language (Ives 2010; Mufwene 2012; Pennycook 2012; Phillipson 2017).

Choosing to write in an African language is not an easy task and any writer who wishes to do so is put under a lot of pressure, as the dynamics of societal power and the power-inflected language ideologies governing the sociolinguistic space of the African countries pull them towards the safe haven of English, the allegedly "neutral" language of national unity and transnational globalization. With English firmly positioned at the forefront of the global linguistic market, the self-translated African writers can blithely take for granted the existence of a market and a readership, whereas the African writers who defend the use of the indigenous languages have instead to wage a total struggle that transcends the boundaries of literature.

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