A Utopian Commentary on the Plight of Nigeria: Ken Saro-Wiwa's "Africa Kills Her Sun"

Angela L. Rodrigues

Abstract: This article investigates the presence of utopian elements in Ken Saro-Wiwa's short story "Africa Kills Her Sun," and the extent to which they dismantle an otherwise bleak commentary on the protagonist's reality. Ernst Bloch's notions of "pre-illumination," "daydreaming," and "not-yet" are employed as analytical tools in order to unravel the narrative's utopian content.

Résumé: Cet article étudie la présence d'éléments utopiques dans le récit de Ken Saro-Wiwa "L'Afrique tue son soleil" et la mesure à laquelle ils démantèlent un commentaire autrement sombre sur la réalité du protagoniste. Les concepts de Ernst Bloch de "pré illumination," "rêverie," et "pas-encore" sont utilisés comme outils d'analyse afin de révéler la force utopique de la narration.

Keywords: Utopia; death; Ken Saro-Wiwa; Ernst Bloch; Nigeria

> If there were nothing but narrow, suffocating, firmly established walls around the urging after what the subjective lacks, then there would not even be any urging there. But as it is, something is still open to it, its urging, wishing, doing has room. What is not can still become, what is realized presupposes Possible in its material.
>
> —Ernst Bloch

> Dance my people for we have seen tomorrow
> And there is an Ogoni star in the sky.
>
> —Ken Saro-Wiwa

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"Africa Kills Her Sun," a story by the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa published in 1989 in *Adaku and Other Stories*, depicts the final living moments of a Nigerian prisoner, Bana, and his two friends and cellmates, Sazan and Jimba. While the latter sleep peacefully on the floor, as people who resiliently and honestly accept their futures, Bana writes a letter to his childhood girlfriend, Zole: a confession, a diary, but also, and foremost, a text of hope, despite the odds and the prisoners' impending deaths. Bana and his friends will be executed for the murders of Nigerian police officers during a robbery. However, as he confesses in his letter to Zole, although they were the leaders of a group of armed robbers, they did not commit the murders and never predicted such an outcome. Despite that, the three friends decided to plead guilty in order to protect the others involved. As highlighted in the story, they are by no means afraid to die. In fact, they choose to be shot at the same time because they do not wish to be punished in different ways. About Sazan and Jimba Bana writes, "It's exhilarating to find them so disdainful of life. Their style is the stuff of which history is made. In another time and in another country, they'd be Sir Francis Drake, Courtes or Sir Walter Raleigh. They'd have made empires and earned national honors. But here, our life is one big disaster, an endless tragedy" (155). Drake and Raleigh, of course, were sixteenth-century colonists who were honored by Queen Elizabeth I and who remain, to this day, important historical figures. The irony could not be more precise: while the exploitation and pillaging of native peoples are praised worldwide and their protagonists decorated, petit African robbers are publicly executed and "they die," as Bana states, "unsung" (155).

Denouncing the corruption, the abuse of power, and the hypocrisy of Nigerian authorities, "Africa Kills Her Sun" expresses some of Saro-Wiwa's lifelong concerns. As is well known, Saro-Wiwa was an activist who spent a great deal of his life struggling to protect the Ogoniland, a coveted petroleum-rich region situated in southern Nigeria. He was one of the founders, in 1990, of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which denounced the destruction of the Ogoniland by oil companies such as Shell and Chevron and sought to promote political and social awareness among the Ogoni. Due to his political activism and provocative writings, Saro-Wiwa faced numerous charges and was arrested in 1994. He was hanged by the Nigerian authorities in 1995, along with eight other Ogoni colleagues, for the supposed murder of four Ogoni chiefs who did not agree with MOSOP's leadership. About the day of his prosecution Saro-Wiwa stated that "on trial also is the Nigerian nation, its present rulers and all those who assist them. . . . The military do not act alone. They are supported by a gaggle of politicians, lawyers, judges, academics, and businessmen, all of them hiding under the claim that they are only doing their duty" (quoted in Lock 2000:13). According to Ato Quayson (1998:65), Saro-Wiwa "interprets the history of Ogoniland as a tragedy. . . . For him their predicament could only be relieved through the total commitment of his own life." Likewise, Francis Angrey (2000:103) contends that "Saro-Wiwa

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lived and died as a voice that spoke for the helpless and hapless citizens. He was an indefatigable fighter who was well known for his activism in the Nigerian social milieu. He saw literature as an efficacious weapon which a writer must use to advance the cause of his people." Saro-Wiwa's own statements on the subject leave no doubt as to his political views. In a letter to the United Nations' Working Group on Indigenous Populations he stated that

> environmental degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous Ogoni people. Incidental to and indeed compounding this ecological devastation is the political marginalization and complete oppression of the Ogoni and especially the denial of their rights, including land rights. . . . The demands of the Ogoni for autonomy and self-determination even within the Nigerian nation have been ignored. . . . The Ogoni are being consigned to slavery and extinction. (1995:96–97)

Twenty-two years after Saro-Wiwa's execution, the Niger Delta region is still being victimized by the government and by oil companies: the land has been exploited to the fullest and the people, whose plight hardly draws the world's necessary attention, have been dramatically impoverished. They are greatly resilient, nonetheless, and Saro-Wiwa's legacy remains very much in place.[1]

The predicament of the Ogoni, as well as the condition of a postcolonial Nigeria debased by greed, mismanagement, poverty, and social injustice, figures prominently in Saro-Wiwa's fiction, which denounces and ridicules the absurdities engendered by the country's degraded political system. My intention here, though, is not so much to elaborate on his denunciatory discourse, but to discuss the utopian motifs that permeate the short story "Africa Kills Her Sun," despite its tragic overtones. More specifically, I employ Ernst Bloch's notions of "pre-illumination" (*Vorscheine*), "daydreaming" (*Tagtraum*), and "not-yet" (*noch-nicht*), which I believe to be useful as interpretative tools in this case. The idea of "not-yet"—whereby human life is both limited and encouraged by social forces and by a desire for a better world—is fundamental in Bloch's philosophy, a *tour de force* that makes his views on utopia unique and dismantles any easy, uncomplicated definition of the term (Thompson 2009). For Bloch (1996:144), "the determined imagination of the utopian function is distinguished from mere fantasizing precisely by the fact that only the former has in its favour a Not-Yet-Being of an expectable kind, i.e., does not play around and get lost in an Empty-Possible, but psychologically anticipates a Real-Possible." In this context of continual possibilities, "pre-illuminations" figure as sparkles of utopia in the present that point to the real prospect of an as yet nonexistent world, so that utopia is always already permeating reality. Likewise, daydreams are viewed as manifestations of utopia that result from an "anticipatory consciousness" (1996:76). They "always come from a feeling of something lacking . . . [and] they are all dreams of a better life," dreams

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that "have sustained men with courage and hope, not by looking away from the real, but, on the contrary, by looking into its progress, into its horizon" (1996:76). Daydreams are, in fact, intertwined with hope, as both extract from reality its predisposition for a different, better world. Indeed, Bloch establishes a productive connection between utopia and hope throughout his work: as Thompson explains, "Hope as a principle [in Bloch's writings] demonstrates that it is something linked not just to optimism but to the tendencies present in a material world that is constantly in flux" (2013:3).

It might be useful here to explain that my interest in the theme of utopia has to do not only with its presence in some of Saro-Wiwa's literary works but also with my own belief in the importance and contemporaneity of the subject.[2] In a world of sheer inequalities and violent relations of production, where money and power dictate each and every decision regardless of social and environmental issues, a focus on hope and utopia seems relevant and perhaps even necessary. But of course, in order to make sense of the subject, one must get rid of the fallacious idea of utopia as an unreachable "no place" or worse, as a totalitarian project. According to Bronislaw Baczko (1989:62), "it is not utopia that explains the functioning of a totalitarian system; on the contrary, it is the system, its device of symbolic representations, its mechanisms of power exercise, etc., that define in each case the 'utopian formula'" (my translation). Baczko is here contesting the idea, most prevalent from the 1970s onward, that utopia constitutes a project of ultimate oppression and control—"the anticipation of the totalitarian universe and even of the concentrationist universe" (1989:52; my translation). As he asserts, supposed relations between utopias and totalitarian regimes can only be established if they are historically contextualized, that is, if one "focuses on the role of a determined utopia in a determined totalitarian system as well as . . . in its respective ideologies" (1989:54; my translation). Likewise, Ruth Levitas (2013:xiii) dismisses claims that pose utopia as a blueprint preceding totalitarianism. Building on Bloch and Paul Ricoeur, Levitas (2013:xvii) affirms that utopia amounts to a "transformation of existential experience and of the objective structures of the social world that generates that experience." She also maintains that "a proper analytical definition of utopia allows it to be fragmentary, fleeting, elusive" (2013:4). As for the notion of "no-place" (*ou-topos*) or the place of pure happiness and perfection (*eu-topos*), both mentioned in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), it should be emphasized that Bloch's philosophy presents itself as a radical and productive alternative to any predetermined utopian meaning, inasmuch as it fosters precisely the incompleteness, the not-yetness, of reality. He sees utopia as simultaneously pervasive, in the form of "pre-illuminations," and elusive, insofar as it is, as Thompson explains, a "concrete product from the process of its own creation" (2013:34). Bloch uses the term *concrete* in the sense of "growing together," from the Latin *concrescere*, thus emphasizing the idea of a continuous process that happens as the present unravels before one's eyes.[3]

These are complex readings that redeem utopia from a simplistic definition and pose it, alternatively, as constitutive of human existence.

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Reading Saro-Wiwa from such a perspective might shed some new light on the works of a writer for whom literature had a fundamental political function and was by no means disconnected from his endeavors as an activist. In fact, many of Saro-Wiwa's literary texts seem to take the revolutionary utopian possibilities of the present to the extreme. As Austin George (2006) points out, some of Saro-Wiwa's characters are constructed as elements in a frontier between a dismaying present and a promising future that is envisioned not so much through a plan but through an act of absolute surrender to the historical forces of the moment. In his analysis of *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrok's Prison*, George affirms that "Saro-Wiwa enables us to have a mental glimpse of an alternative utopia of the 'nation'; but significantly it is also through the experiences and travails of these characters that the writer conducts much of his artistic exposé of the degeneration of society" (2006:164). As I intend to demonstrate, the "dialectical tension between anomie and hope" identified by George (2006:164) in the two novels can also be detected in the protagonist's love letter through the juxtaposition of scenes of decay, on the one hand, and utopian motifs, on the other. The latter are conveyed mainly through the images of the pond, the ocean, the candlelight in his cell, and the sun, all mentioned in Bana's letter. Furthermore, the very act of writing, as well as Bana's love for Zole, stands as a utopian counterpoint to his tragic situation. These elements are interpreted here as instances of "pre-illumination" and "daydreaming" that contradict an appalling present and anticipate a not-yet-existent nobler future.

Bana's Utopian Journey toward Death

Bana spends the last evening of his life writing a letter, which he defines as "a celebration, a final act of love" (150). The letter shows no sign of desperation, guilt, or remorse, but it definitely displays Bana's contempt for the world he is about to leave. More than once he rejects that world and demonstrates pity for those, like Zole, who are destined to remain in it. As he says of the prison guard, "he's condemned, like most others, to live, to play out his assigned role in your hell of a world. I see him burning out his dull, uncomprehending life, doing his menial job for a pittance and a bribe for the next so many years" (151). Later in the text Bana poignantly declares that "the divide between us breathing like everyone else in the Stadium and us as meat for worms is, oh, so slim, it makes life a walking death! But I should be glad to be rid of the world, of a meaningless existence that grows more dreary by the day" (159).

Despite his contempt for life and for the world he co-inhabits with dull people who are unable to critically assess their social condition, Bana writes to his friend and defines his writing as "a final act of love." Of course, there is no guarantee that Zole will receive the letter, let alone make any sense of it. However, writing at that moment gives a specific significance to Bana's death, an event ultimately infused with open-ended futures. The act of writing

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should then be seen as the expression of a desire, as if the letter and the hope that Zole will eventually read it were stronger than the death sentence itself. For Bana there is no end, but a constant renewal of endless possibilities. As he tells Zole, his letter is

> a celebration, a final act of love, a quality which, in spite of my career, in spite of tomorrow morning, I do not possess in abundance, and cherish. For, I've always treasured the many moments of pleasure we spent together in our youth when the world was new and the fishes flew in golden ponds. In the love we then shared have I found happiness, a true resting place, a shelter from the many storms that have buffeted my brief life. Whenever I've been most alone, whenever I've been torn by conflict and pain, I've turned to that love for the resolution which has sustained and seen me through. (151–52)

The metaphor of the golden pond is particularly significant. It refers to a moment in Bana's life when living seemed hopeful, simple, and beautiful—very different indeed from what he later describes as "a history of violence, of murder, of disregard for life. Pleasure in inflicting pain—sadism" (161), which he perceives as constitutive of postindependence Nigerian political culture. The history of an essentially corrupt postcolonial Nigeria is briefly described in the story, Bana's execution being one of the symptoms of such corruptibility. As he explains in his letter, the country produces scapegoats in order to hide a culture of dishonesty, violence, and public alienation. He is a criminal, but as such he is in the company of "presidents of countries, transnational organizations, public servants high and low, men and women" (154). However, only the outcasts and underprivileged are punished. In this sense, the execution of Bana, Jimba, and Sazan will be nothing more than a spectacle used to distract the people from a perverse political reality in which the country's very authorities are the worst murderers and bandits. That does not mean, however, that the masses of people are exempted from Bana's assessment. At one point he writes that

> were it not for the unfeeling nation, among a people inured to evil and taking sadistic pleasure in the loss of life, some questions might have been asked. No doubt, many will ask the questions, but they will do it in the safety and comfort of their homes, over the interminable bottles of beer, uncomprehendingly watching their boring, cheap, television programmes, the rejects of Europe and America, imported to fill their vacuity. They will salve their conscience with more bottles of beer, wash the answers down their gullets and pass questions, conscience and answers out to waste into their open sewers choking with concentrated filth and murk. And they will forget. (152)

This passage shows the way in which the spectacle of death has been naturalized and universalized to the extent of becoming a pleasurable event or, for those who are able to question their realities, an easily forgettable one.

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This is consistent with the process of alienation which, according to Bana, is perpetrated by Europe, the United States, and African governments through the import of media "rejects." Although briefly mentioned, such a state of affairs resonates with an entire history of cultural imperialism that traversed the colonial period and assumed different forms in postcolonial Nigeria. Once again, the Niger Delta situation deserves attention. As Paul Ugor affirms

> although Nigeria is notorious for its lack of social services in general, the plight of the Delta region, especially considering its status as the "golden goose" of the Nigerian nation, is abysmal. Roads, electricity, healthcare, schools and other basic social amenities are either in absolute disrepair or completely non-existent. In spite of the existence of many oil companies and subsidiary oil-servicing companies in the Delta, it is estimated that at least "one in every seven young people in the region" is jobless . . . It is in this sense that former militant Asari Dokubo once described the Niger Delta as being an "occupied and abused territory" whose natural resources are forcefully extracted, and the proceeds used for the improvement of the lives of external political and economic power brokers. (2013:273)

For Bana, this is precisely the kind of situation that Nigerians generally ignore: drunk and mesmerized by television, citizens end up supporting the mismanagement of the country, as well as the atrocities committed in the name of alleged good governance. The effacement of a collective memory is at play here, as Nigerians seem to forget their social and political roles and simply acquiesce to whatever the ruling elite dictates.

Against such a reality of corruption, violence, and recklessness stands the indelible image of a golden moment, which prompts Bana to write the letter. As it seems, the prison walls are simply not enough to contain his wish, which, however aimed at the future, is based on his cherished memories. The pond appears in this case not as a nostalgic remembrance, but as an image that triggers the desire to achieve something in the future, that is, to connect with Zole and transmit his message, therefore aiding in the (possible) construction of a better life.[4] Equally, when picturing the way they are going to be killed, Bana interrupts his thoughts and gives the reader an image of the ocean as the perfect place to die. Of the sea, Bana says he loves "its wide expanse, its anonymity, its strength, its unfathomable depth" (157). He rapidly changes this meditative tone by pointing ironically to the food chain he would then be a part of. Yet the ocean remains a powerful image in Bana's letter, one that conflicts with what he believes is going to be his real fate: having his body carried on a truck and then dumped in a common grave.

Gold and blue contrast beautifully with Bana's suffocating, dark cell. Freedom and pleasure lie dormant in the waters. As he drifts from reality to imagination, both images—ocean and pond—convey a sense of peace that ultimately effaces the horror of his execution. The colors in this case might be interpreted as textual elements that metaphorically disperse what

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Bloch calls the "darkness of the lived moment," the inherent obstacles of grasping one's reality, given the elusiveness and nearness of the present.[5] Curiously, in "Africa Kills Her Sun" darkness materially involves the very process of writing. At one point Bana says, "in the cell here, the darkness is still all-pervasive, except for the flickering light of the candle by which I write" (156–57). This sentence can be interpreted in terms of Bloch's dialectics between light and darkness, utopia being created not only by the dim candlelight but also by the writing it enables. That "flickering light" simultaneously reveals, scatters, and transcends the darkness of the lived moment, creating a certain awareness of what the past, present, and future actually embody. From this perspective, both the candlelight and the letter can be interpreted as "pre-illuminations" that are capable of anticipating a promising future, as if reality were pregnant and the letter were the unborn child still being formed in the womb of history.

More than a "celebration, a final act of love," Bana's letter metaphorizes his eventual rebirth and constitutes the very antithesis of his death. He seems to point in that direction when he signs "Yours, forever," an ironic way of referring to his execution, as well as a commentary on the continuance of his life.

Approaching Death and Daydreams

Ernst Bloch's utopian philosophy—and specifically, his notion of "daydreaming"—illuminates not only Bana's acceptance of his impending death, but also the specific way in which he chooses to face his death sentence. I use the word "choose" deliberately to indicate the character's tenacity and resolution not to be defeated by the material forces that lead to his death. In these same material forces he finds the means to somehow preserve his life and to make sure a part of it—one that is not at all irrelevant—remains alive. He chooses to use his last minutes to move forward, to break the walls of his cell through his imagination and desire, reaching places his body can no longer attain. By doing this, Bana consciously daydreams, in the sense proposed by Bloch.

In the introduction to *The Philosophy of Hope,* Bloch discusses the daydreams as follows:

> Everybody's life is pervaded by daydreams: one part of this is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation. This other part has hoping at its core, and is teachable. . . . Nobody has ever lived without daydreams, but it is a question of knowing them deeper and deeper and in this way keeping them trained unerringly, usefully, on what is right. Let the daydreams grow even fuller, since this means they are enriching themselves around the sober glance; not in the sense of clogging, but of becoming clear. Not in the sense of merely contemplative reason which takes things as they are and as they stand, but of participating reason which takes them as they go, and therefore also as they could go better. (1996:3)

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Bana's final hours, I believe, are filled with thoughts and desires that amount to a series of daydreams. His body is enslaved and dominated by concrete walls; soon, he will be shot, dragged as garbage, and finally disposed of as a useless burden. It seems only fair to say that the most justifiable feeling for anyone facing such a horrific situation is despair. Yet Bana's imagination flows and takes him to open spaces such as the ocean and the pond. My claim is that those ideas represent not an escape from his condition, but precisely daydreams of a better life. While Sazan and Jimba enjoy their final sleep, Bana daydreams, and consequently overcomes his physical confinement by producing a new reality. He contemplates life as it should or could be, "does not accept renunciation," and attempts to share his dreams.

The same analysis can also be applied to the image of the sun in the title of the story. At the end of the letter, Bana asks Zole to look for a newspaper picture of the moment he is killed and have someone make a stone sculpture of it, preserving his "hard . . . relentless aspect" (159). He wants the sculpture to sit on his empty grave in a cemetery accompanied by an epitaph that reads "Africa kills her sun"—an adaptation of the sentence "Africa kills her sons" once proffered, according to Bana, by an African leader. The motto indicates that by killing Africa's youth, African authorities are actually destroying the continent's future and hope. The killing of Africa's sun expands and intensifies that idea, alluding to the annihilation of the beauties and powers of the continent. Ultimately, it represents the historical surrender of Africa to colonial and neocolonial forces and the inattention of Africans to their own potential and environmental richness. As a sad image of devastation and waste, it also speaks directly to the Ogoni predicament, so dear to the author. As Bana underlines in his letter, "in every facet of our lives . . . robbery is the base line. . . . In the early days, our forebears sold their kinsmen into slavery for minor items such as beads, mirrors, alcohol and tobacco. These days, the tune is the same, only the articles have changed into cars, transistor radios and bank accounts" (156). Nevertheless, the sun still exists, and survives its attempted annihilation. Once more, a dream of color, energy, warmth, and life illuminates a desolate reality: Bana modifies the word "sons" as he daydreams of a "sun" that stands for the human value of Africa.

Particularly when occurring on the verge of a person's death, daydreams become a most valuable force, one that represents courage and resilience: it transcends the walls of death, dashes against fear, and even overcomes the darkness of the lived moment, which, according Bloch, can actually be shattered. As he brilliantly explains, "there is only a more genuine contact with the moment in strong experiences and in sharp turning-points of existence, either of our own existence or of the time, in so far as they are noticed by the eye that has presence of mind" (1996:293–94). Bloch is here discussing the conditions of possibility for perceiving and grasping the Now, which requires the ability to recognize such a radical moment in one's existence and the strength of character to act accordingly: "Extraordinary men of action seem to offer genuine Carpe diem, as decision at the required moment, as power not to miss its opportunity" (1996:294).

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Death—often viewed as the anti-utopian phenomenon par excellence—takes on a different meaning here. As Frances Daly explains in "The Zero-Point: Encountering the Dark Emptiness of Nothingness," Bloch's utopian philosophy posits "an extra-territoriality to the demise of the self," such that "in the death and disappearance of what has not yet become, something appears" (2013:183). This means that death, for Bloch, is by no means the end of utopia; simply put, that which never was—as definitive, certain, complete matter—cannot die. What is more, there is something external to one's death, something redeeming and redeemable, which encompasses those who die as well as the remaining world, so that the negativity of death contains its own denial. The darkness of the lived moment is always, and necessarily, pregnant with contradictory forces, and the moment of one's death, as the darkest of all possible darknesses, "the zero-point," is not different.

Since, according to Bloch, living means to be present in the here and "Now," "plucking the day, in the simplest and most basic sense," no person is "really alive" except in those rare instances in which the darkness of the lived moment is dissipated through both circumstance and one's appropriate vision (1996:293). Such a rendering of what it means to be alive is crucial to the understanding of Bana's death. Considering his final actions and thoughts, it is possible to argue that Bana interprets his own history from a perspective that emphasizes not the end but the continuation of his life after death. He also seems to be aware of his very condition of becoming—his not-yetness—which he explores to the fullest by writing, loving, and daydreaming. His imminent death thus powerfully redeems past and present, invigorating an otherwise obscure moment. More precisely, when Bana finally dissipates the darkness of the lived moment, which happens on the threshold of his death, he is most alive. Death is, hence, ultimately transcended, sealing both Bana's life and the short story in a utopian mode.

"African Kills Her Sun": Bana/Saro-Wiwa

Bana's letter, regardless of its content or of its being read by Zole, can be considered a representation of a concrete utopia. The letter and the act of writing can be understood as a utopia that grows as Bana cherishes his last moments, envisioning death but also hoping for a different future. Peter Thompson asserts that "a concrete utopia is one that has existence only as a possible outcome of an autopoietic process[,] but . . . it contains within it shards of past and present utopian images—abstractions—that we carry forward with us on the journey but that also carry us forward, giving us the will to keep pushing forward and to become what we might be" (2013:13). Obviously, there is a sense in which Bana is not allowed a future in Saro-Wiwa's story—as much as Africans might not survive the neocolonial oppression that kills Africa's sons. Saro-Wiwa's own destiny unavoidably comes to mind: a man who sacrificed his life and died with his companions for not

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accepting the injustices continuously suffered by the Ogoni, for speaking truth to power, and for believing in a different, less oppressive future. Read side by side with Bloch, however, the story reveals a future hidden in Bana's utopian images, one that is able to restore his present reality as it "grows together" with the hope that his death will not be in vain.

The circumstances surrounding Bana's and his friends' deaths should be sufficient grounds for reading the story as a representation of the tragic destiny of African peoples under the neocolonial regime, the "big disaster" and "endless tragedy" that Bana refers to in his letter. Nevertheless, through its specific images and metaphors, the narrative points to the possibility of a better future. This, I believe, is essential to the understanding of the story in terms of the "dialectical tension between anomie and hope" identified by Austin George in Saro-Wiwa's novels, or, more specifically, as a story that fosters a different future for Nigeria and "her sons." The way Bana sees Zole and metaphorizes their love story conjures images of light, security, and peace. Moreover, the request to have his last expression carved on a sculpture reveals Bana's desire to have his fate known and reinterpreted to the public, so that history will not be completely erased and he will become more than a dead corpse in a common vault. Instead, his destiny will be, somehow, a memory of the history of Nigeria. Utopia is here essentially manifested in Bana's agency, which encompasses his writing and his request to Zole, but also the positive images he brings from the past, the love he feels in the present, and his hope in the future. To dismiss this fundamental need and capacity to dream and hope is to condemn humanity to believing that a dull and enslaved existence of acquiescence and obedience is all there is. Most important, it means depriving humans of an otherwise inherent awareness of their position in the world as agents.

In its last moments, Bana's life is bright and fulfilled. And as he makes the most of it—reinventing the past and imagining alternative realities for his body, his grave, his writing, and his friends—he inevitably changes the present and the future, despite the fact that he will be executed for a crime he did not commit. Bana writes to Zole as someone who has achieved the wisdom necessary to understand that the end is not the end, or, as Bloch affirms, that "what is not can still become." Bana's sun—as much as the many suns that constitute Saro-Wiwa's struggle—the Ogoni, the Niger Delta, and the underprivileged in Nigeria—is one that will have the right to live, the right to shine. Meanwhile, one continues striving, living, and dying so its brightness will not perish.

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Notes

1. For instance, groups of militant youths fought the predation of the Niger Delta between 2006 and 2009. According to Edlyne Anugwom (2015:32), "the organizations that have engaged in the conflict are not just the products of impulsive thinking or simply exuberant outcomes of youthful energy. On the contrary, [they] are well organized, well structured, and well armed." In 2009 an amnesty program was launched in order to dissipate those movements of resistance. As Paul Ugor explains (2013:272), "the strategy emerged as a desperate bid to restore industrial peace in the region, and hence uninterrupted

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production and flow of crude oil, oil profits and economic rents to both local and international political and economic interests." Since then, the conflicts have diminished, but government actions to alleviate poverty and social problems have hardly matched the promises and expectations.

2. Among other pieces, the poem "Dance" is a good example of a utopian text, as the lyrical voice invites the Ogoni people to playfully join the struggle against greed, injustice, and war. The poem ends on an ambiguous and melancholic note: the Ogoni star in the sky can be read as both a symbol of their importance, as they have a special place in the universe, and a memento of the days of happiness and freedom robbed from them in the course of history. Their difficult political and economic reality is, however, infused with hope and daydreams of a better future.
3. Bloch's (1996:17) concrete utopia is essentially Marxist, although he was influenced by different thinkers and contested Marxism on specific grounds (Thompson 2013). According to Levitas (1989:29), "Bloch's central thesis is that human dreaming has always reached towards utopia, with varying mixes of the abstract and the concrete; but only with Marxism has it become possible for utopia to be fully graspable in the imagination and hence in reality." In my discussion of the notions of pre-illumination, daydreaming, and the "not-yet," however, I abstain from discussing their Marxist implications and undertake to analyze the protagonist's own process of utopian creation.
4. For a brief discussion of the past as an unclosed process and the idea of the future in the past, see Bloch's introduction to *The Principle of Hope* (1996).
5. The "darkness of the lived moment" is pervasive in Bloch's philosophy, and is, in fact, essential to the realization of daydreams and utopia itself. In his words (1996:292–93),

> not the most distant therefore, but *the nearest is still completely dark*, and precisely because it is the nearest and most immanent; *the knot of the riddle of existence is to be found in this nearest*. The life of the Now, the most genuinely intensive life, is not yet brought before itself, brought to itself as seen, as opened up; thus it is least of all being-here, let alone being-evident. The Now of the existence, which drives everything and in which everything drives, is the most inexperienced thing that there is; it still drives continually under the world. It constitutes the realizing aspect which has least realized itself—an active moment-darkness of itself.

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