



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

van Weyenberg, A.L.B.

Publication date
2011

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Weyenberg, A. L. B. (2011). *The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy*. Eigen Beheer.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 5

Mourning Remains: Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

...in the theatre on the Pnyx, the
spectator discovers through catharsis
that he is a mortal first, a citizen second

—Nicole Loraux

If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world
I'd have stayed peacefully in heaven instead.

—Femi Osofisan, *Women of Owu*

In this last chapter, I focus on mourning through an examination of Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* (2006), an adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women* (415 BC). My focus on mourning follows in part from the previous chapter. If the narration of traumatic events allows them to enter into memory, as Bal, Crewe and Spitzer suggest, the stories of Electra's and Clytemnestra's South African refigurations not only express their suffering but also constitute their processes of mourning (1999: x). The TRC hearings were intended to facilitate those processes on both a personal and national level. I have analysed their complex workings as theatres of mourning, providing a forum for, while at the same time mediating, individual accounts. Their complexity results from the dual demands to which mourning responds: the practice is directed both towards the past, in that it commemorates loss, and to the future, in that it defines what follows this loss. As the site where past and future compete, mourning has crucial relevance at moments of political transition.

My emphasis on mourning not only follows from Farber's and Fleishman's adaptations of the *Oresteia*, however, but also from the other adaptations I have discussed in this study. As I will try to demonstrate, mourning is central to the stories

of Antigone and her African revolutionary refigurations, which were discussed in Chapter Two, and to the ritual sacrifice in Soyinka's Nigerian reworking of the *Bacchae*, as discussed in Chapter Three. For that reason, I devote part of this chapter to revisiting the plays considered so far to delineate what is at stake, politically and historically, in mourning. For this purpose, I depart from Nicole Loraux's concept of the "mourning voice." I then return to Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* to investigate the implications of mourning in detail. Lastly, I address the performative potential that mourning may hold and move to its broader relevance.

THE MOURNING VOICE

On the title page, "*Women of Owu*" is followed by "(An African Re-reading of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* first commissioned by the Chipping Norton Theatre, UK)" (iii). Different from *Tegonni: an African Antigone*, Osofisan does not cite the pre-text within his title, instead bracketing his forerunner. The Euripidean tragedy is primarily implicated as a piece of additional information. Distancing pre-text from adaptation, the politics of adaptation at play here not so much appropriates "the" canonical text but rather cites it as "an" available source. This gesture acquires increased relevance in relation to the second half of Osofisan's bracketed reference, the play's British commissioning theatre, where *Women of Owu* was first staged in 2004. The enduring cultural dominance of Britain, once the imperial centre that mobilised Greek tragedy as part of its civilising mission and a continuing force in the production and circulation of Anglophone African cultural texts, is countered by casting Euripides' tragedy as only one of many sources available to African playwrights today.¹

Trojan Women was the third tragedy of a trilogy dealing with the Trojan War, waged by the Greeks against the Trojans after the Trojan prince Paris had taken Helen from her husband king Menelaus of Sparta. The Trojan War is among the most important events in Greek mythology and the topic of many ancient Greek texts, most famously Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In *Trojan Women* Euripides follows the fates of the women of Troy after their city has been sacked and their husbands have been killed. In *Women of Owu* Osofisan transposes the action to the city of Owu in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, preceding the colonisation of what is now known as Nigeria. In a "note on the play's genesis" in the 2006 publication, he elucidates his choice to draw on *Trojan Women* by calling attention to the correspondences between the contexts of both plays. He explains that *Women of Owu* deals with the Owu war, which started

¹ Director Chuck Mike took over the project with his company Collective Artists, whose members were for the most part from Nigeria or the Caribbean. The production premiered on 2 February 2004 and toured England after that (Götrick 2008: 83). My analysis is based on the published text (2006).

when the combined armies of the southern Yoruba kingdoms Ijebu and Ife, together with recruited mercenaries from Oyo, attacked Owu “with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apoumu from Owu’s control” (2006: vii). When asked to write an adaptation of Euripides’ tragedy, Osofisan explains, he thought of the Owu war. There are indeed notable correspondences between the stories of Owu and Troy. In Osofisan’s rendition, the Owu war similarly started over a woman, when Iyonloye, the favourite wife of Ife’s general Okunade, was captured and given as a wife to one of the Owu princes (2006: 6). Like Troy, Owu did not surrender easily, so that it lasted seven years before the city was sacked. The fate of the people of Owu at the hands of their fellow Yoruba also resembled that of the Trojans at the hands of the Greeks: the male population was slaughtered and the women were carried away into slavery.

Like Euripides, Osofisan dramatises the plight of women in war situations. The front page of the programme to the London production describes *Women of Owu* as a “tale of women as the spoils of war,” and the Director’s Notes speak of the vulnerable situation of women (Götrick 2008: 91, note 25). Similarly to Euripides’ women of Troy, the women of Owu bewail the destruction of their city, the deaths of their husbands and sons, and their fate as slaves and concubines to the victorious troops. They mourn as Yoruba women traditionally mourn, their hair cut short and their bare shoulders painted grey with ashes.² Their lamentations are expressed partly in the text, partly through Yoruba songs, the transcriptions of which are included at the back of the publication with English translations. The lyrics will only be understood by those who speak Yoruba, but, according to Osofisan, “their essence is to be distilled more from the mood and atmosphere they create ... than from the actual, literal meaning of the lines” (2006: 68).³ My limitation to the written transcript cannot do justice to the complexity of lamentation. As Rebecca Saunders explains, the practice is situated between language and the unutterable, between the highly formalised and the improvised, as well as between dance, song, poetry and narrative (2007: xiii). But although the text of the play cannot convey the force of the lamentation fully, it is able to pass on part of it.

With his emphasis on mourning, Osofisan follows his pre-text *Trojan Women*. As Loraux describes, Euripides’ play moves beyond a representation to a performance of mourning, conveying “a mourning that nothing can appease, not even the repetition of its own voice, nothing except its own enormity” (2002: 12). She observes that the characteristic “mourning voice” of Greek tragedy usually remains unheard when Greek tragedy is narrowly defined as a political genre. She refers to Jean Paul Sartre’s

² Described by Götrick, who saw three performances of *Women of Owu* at the Oval House in London: on 3 and 4 March 2004 (2008: 84).

³ Yoruba is spoken as a first language in most of Western Nigeria. What is referred to as Standard Yoruba is used as a Lingua Franca among speakers of the other varieties of the language, such as those of Ijesa, Oyo, Ondo, Eikiti, Owo, Ikale, Ijebu, Egba and Akoko (C. O. Ajila 2004: 141).

adaptation of *Trojan Women*, written in 1965 against the background of the Algerian War and the Vietnam War (4, 9, 81). For a political activist and intellectual of the 1960s, Loraux suggests, the repetitiveness of mourning was irrelevant. But the situation has changed: the emphasis on Greek tragedy as a political weapon has given way to other readings; “expressions of mourning have become, if not a weapon of war, at least the only weapon in a struggle that is unarmed, or hopeless,” she concludes (12-13). Loraux claims that “tragedy is not *only* politics,” while she simultaneously re-establishes a close relation between mourning and politics, which activist adaptations of tragedy as Sartre’s have tended to neglect or even reject (16).

Loraux’s argument provokes the question whether the adaptations in my corpus may reveal a similar tendency. On the one hand, the playwrights employ Greek tragedy as a political genre, which arguably detracts from Loraux’s claim that tragedy is no longer looked upon as a possible political weapon. For these playwrights, Greek tragedy is precisely that: a vehicle to address political issues and inspire change. I have discussed in the first chapter how politicised readings of Greek tragedy undermine the dominant perception of tragedy as a genre that reaffirms an unchanging human nature, or that is solely concerned with existential or metaphysical questions. On the other hand, precisely because of their emphasis on political change, the plays are good demonstrations of Loraux’s warning that the emphasis on politics entails the danger of relegating other voices to the background. And, those voices need to be heard because they may yet hold political relevance.

Retrospectively, most adaptations I have discussed reveal an uneasy relation between stories of suffering and loss and the emphatic messages of political change they proclaim. It is as if the voices of those who suffer violence are in constant danger of being drowned out by the calls for resistance and revolution made on their behalf. To explain what I mean with this, let me first refer to the reworkings of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in Chapter Two. Re-reading *Antigone* as a revolutionary heroine, Fugard, Kani and Ntshona’s *The Island* and Osofisan’s *Tegonni: an African Antigone* give her new political relevance in the contexts of South Africa and Nigeria, which challenges traditional readings of *Antigone* as a figure before, outside or opposed to politics. At the same time, *Antigone*’s story was never exclusively one of political resistance. She also speaks powerfully to the experiences of those who suffer violence, those who remain after the struggle, those who are unable to properly mourn their loved ones, and those who are unable to direct their gaze towards the future.

As *Antigone*’s family history shows, her relentless fight to bury her brother Polynices is a direct consequence of her not having been able to bury and mourn her father/brother Oedipus, and having been made hostage to the past. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus asks king Theseus of Athens to keep the location of his grave a secret, promising Athens a prosperous future in exchange. Maybe he attempts to save

his children by unwriting his incestuous family history in this way, but, effectively making it impossible for them to properly mourn him, the opposite happens. Antigone is unable to incorporate her father's memory within her; Oedipus becomes the ghost that eternally haunts her. What Antigone weeps for, writes Derrida, "is less her father, perhaps, than her mourning, the mourning she has been deprived of, if we can put it like that. She weeps at being deprived of a normal mourning. She weeps for her mourning, if that is possible" (2000: 111). Antigone, in short, is "mourning mourning," which as Khanna suggests seems more like a form of melancholia, "an emotion at one remove having lost the ability to know what is lost" (2003: 26).

For Gillian Rose Antigone's mourning has political potential because it deviates from what is officially allowed. Through her mourning of her brother, Antigone critiques the law. This critique signals the possibility of a new or modified law (1996: 35-36). In this interpretation, mourning moves from psychological problem to political promise. Fugard, Kani and Ntshona give Antigone a similar emphasis in *The Island*. Performing *Antigone* leads the prisoners to a re-affirmation of their defiance of and struggle against apartheid. In Osofisan's *Tegonni, an African Antigone*, Antigone becomes an inspiration for revolutionary change in both nineteenth-century and contemporary Nigeria. But what about Antigone? How does she relate to the political promise that she articulates?

Antigone's fight, it seems, is fundamentally a fight for a future; for a future—and this is the real tragedy of her tale—that can never include her, so that she remains fixated in the past. For the prisoners in *The Island*, however, performing *Antigone* achieves the exact opposite effect: it prevents them from turning into stone, like their fellow prisoner Old Harry, who has forgotten everything: "why he's here, where he comes from" (221). Performing *Antigone* becomes a way to remember the past and thus imagine a future beyond the prison walls of apartheid. This "turn" towards the future demonstrates the power of adaptation. Perhaps the plurality of contexts in which *Antigone* has re-emerged and will re-emerge is in itself a manifestation of her variegated possible futures. At the same time, *The Island's* and *Tegonni's* emphasis on *Antigone* as revolutionary heroine may cast a shadow over her other identities: a woman unable to forget, unable to grieve, unable to move on. Within the contexts of apartheid South Africa and (post)colonial Nigeria, in which so many were never able to bury and mourn their loved ones, *Antigone's* identity as a woman fighting for the right to mourn may hold a poignant relevance. Her African refigurations share more

with Antigone than the embodiment of critique or resistance; they too embody the cost of change.⁴

The tension between the private need to mourn and a public demand to forge a new future also comes to the fore in the violent conclusion of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. Agave takes the lead in the brutal dismembering of King Pentheus, who is not only a tyrant, but also her son. As in the Euripidean pre-text, Agave commits her act unknowingly, under Dionysus' spell. Dionysus not only commits violence against Pentheus, but also against Agave. Her tragic fate is lamented by the Old Slave, who grieves that Dionysus is a heartless god, as well as by Agave's father Kadmos, who laments that although Dionysus "had right on his side, [he] lacks/ Compassion, the deeper justice" (300, 304). Ultimately, however, suffering gives way to the hopeful message of political liberation. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Pentheus' gruesome ritual death is sublimated as metaphysical resolution and political revolution.

This ritualistic aesthetic leaves little consideration for the pain of Agave, who has lost her son and has to live on with the knowledge that she was one of his murderers. As theatre scholar Andrea Nouryeh contends, the "depiction of the renewal of life and unification of the community" that Pentheus' sacrifice enables is "bought with a disquieting negation of Agave's voice as a grieving mother" (2001: 161). This fact influences the play's political significance as well. Nouryeh is right that Agave's willing participation in the communion rite and her complicity in her own oppression undermine "the very positive renewal for the community that this ritual is supposed to represent" (167-167). Agave is no agent of but merely an instrument of change. The metaphysical totality in which Soyinka includes sacrifice and violence leaves little room for Agave's pain, her memory, her mourning. She provokes a future into which she herself will never be able to set foot.

The absence of Agave's suffering in Soyinka's *Bacchae* brings to the fore the tense relation between revolution and mourning. Similar to programmes of reconciliation, revolution necessitates the sacrifice of private demands for the sake of the communal good. I discussed how for Raymond Williams, this struggle of men against other men

⁴ According to Olga Taxidou, an interpretation of Antigone's mourning as enabling a different or changed law "carries more the hope of its author than that of its subject," because in it mourning does not so much change the law into a better law, but becomes embodied in the law: "It is a process not of transformation but rather one of masking, traversing and disguising"; in short, "the relationship between mourning and the law can be read as the law's ability to have always and already inscribed within itself its own critique and resistance" (2004: 178). The African refigurings of Antigone challenge this impasse, but possibly—in the case of Tegonni certainly—at their own cost. As discussed in the previous chapter, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy dramatises the problem Taxidou identifies. There, it remains debatable whether the goddesses' mourning voices, softened from cries of vengeance to whispers of lament, still hold the power to challenge the political order and its laws, or whether this challenge, this critique is inscribed *within* the order and ultimately without the promise of future change.

(and let me add women here) rather than gods or mere institutions, makes revolutions tragic. Williams emphasises that tragic danger is not caused by war and revolution, but by the underlying disorder which we continually re-enact. He does not question the necessity of revolution, but he does speak out against ideas of “revolutionary romanticism,” which stay silent about or sublimate the violence that revolutions enact (2006: 102-105). Indeed, as the family history of Oedipus and Antigone demonstrates, no death is ever entirely sacred and no death can provide full closure to troubled familial and political histories. There always remains a residue, a memory, and Antigone’s story is a good case in point. The past will similarly haunt Agave, probably even more so. Having killed her son under the spell of Dionysus, she will never have a recollection of her act. How to mourn what cannot be recollected or recounted? In contrast to that other grieving mother Hecuba, who figures prominently in *Trojan Women* (and for whom Euripides even wrote a separate tragedy), there are no surviving tragedies that tell Agave’s subsequent tale. As the discussed adaptations reveal, the emphasis on political change makes it difficult to hear the mourning voice.

MEMORY AND PROMISE

The question I am trying to raise is whether the emphasis on political change in contemporary African adaptations of Greek tragedy also has a cost. Indeed, their proclamations of resistance and calls for revolution are in danger of relegating other stories to the background, stories that should be heard because they accompany, and are therefore a constitutive part of, programmes of resistance, revolution and reconciliation. Those stories are also part of history and can therefore not be neglected without jeopardising the future. I do not mean to imply that loss is not given importance in these plays, but I do contend that it remains a subtext at the service of the more important message of change. Antigone as brought to the stage by Winston in *The Island*, Tegonni in Osofisan’s *Tegonni* and Agave in Soyinka’s *Bacchae*—they are all symbols of or instruments for a better future, never its subjects. They hold the promise of justice; yet the political future they bring about has no room for them.

Sigmund Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1957) outlines the correspondences and differences between two psychological dispositions. Freud sees melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the traumatised self, locked in repetition, remains identified with the lost object. Mourning, conversely, enables one to begin anew because it allows the subject to work-through the trauma and come to recognise the past as different from the present. In short, Dominic La Capra summarises, mourning allows one to remember the past while also taking leave of it (1997: 81). Using this Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia within a historical perspective, it could be said that, left without a way to engage with

and come to terms with their losses, Antigone, Tegonni and Agave are caught in a melancholic relation to the past, unable to become part of the future they take part in constructing. Their loss is not given a place in the future. It becomes never-ending, forever yet to be mourned.

Although I will not pursue this further, it is interesting to note the increased prevalence of the concept of melancholia in postcolonial theory. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2006), Paul Gilroy interprets it as a destructive pathology that describes neo-imperialist practices, while in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2004), Ranjana Khanna, more positively, understands postcolonial melancholia to hold critical potential, because rather than doing away with this remainder and thereby assimilating otherness and denying the involved loss, melancholia implies that the lost object's remainder is salvaged (2003b: 24). Slavoj Žižek criticises what he considers the “politically correct” gesture of celebrating melancholy over mourning within postcolonial studies, arguing that this “melancholic link to the lost ethnic Object allows us to claim that we remain faithful to our ethnic roots while fully participating in the global capitalist game” (2000: 657-659). In her dissertation *Unrealized Promises: the Subject of Postcolonial Discourse and the New International Division of Labour*, Paulina Aroch Fugellie follows through both Khanna's and Žižek's critiques, revealing the “disturbing complicities” of theorisations of the postcolonial other as a melancholic remainder within postcolonial theory (2010: 252).

The consequences of a melancholic relation to the past are not just personal but also historical. The constructed future is in danger of passing by the history out of which the need for that new future arose to begin with, in danger of eradicating the basis of its very existence. From this perspective, the African reworkings of *Antigone* and the *Bacchae* dramatise the complicated relation between what German philosopher Matthias Fritsch describes as “the memory of injustice and historical violence” and “the political promise of a just future” (2005: 5). Fritsch articulates what is at stake:

If the memory of victimization is brought to the foreground without clear recourse to a promise of change, the insistence on violence and irretrievable loss may slip into a melancholic occlusion of the promise inherent in all useless suffering. ... such memory can easily lend itself to the oblivion, or even justification, of violence inflicted on others—in the past as well as in the present and the future. ... On the other hand, promises of justice without reflective links to memory may also lead to the justification of violent means claimed to be necessary on the way to an end that alone is seen as just. (2005: 2-3)

The tension Fritsch observes between memory and promise is the theme of the two South African reworkings of the *Oresteia* in the previous chapter. These plays dramatise the insight that mourning is not in conflict with but constitutive of the

future. Attempts to contain memory and mourning in programmes of reconciliation, such as that of the TRC, inevitably entail loss.

The plays also show that memory is potentially dangerous. Their Aeschylean pre-text demonstrates this clearly as well. The cycle of violence perpetuated in the first two parts of the *Oresteia* stems from a memory that justifies vengeance. The memory of her daughter inspires Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon; the memory of their father inspires Electra and Orestes, in turn, to kill their mother. The Furies of vengeance, demanding blood-vengeance for the committed matricide, could be seen as the extreme and terrifying embodiment of the “memory of victimisation” that Fritsch describes. Their appearance illustrates this: they are like “Gorgons, with grey cloaks” and “snakes coiled swarming round their bodies”; they are “living horrors” and “avenging hounds” with “dreadful eyes dripping with bloody pus” (Aeschylus 1959: 142-3). As indicated, Athena succeeds in containing and controlling the goddesses’ vengeful memory, transforming their songs of violent lament into songs of praise for the new civic institutions; their blood-demanding memory of past wrongs into the public commemoration that benefits Athens. With reference to Fritsch, this transformation can be seen as an attempt to connect the promise of justice to memory so as to inaugurate a new history. Yet, as Fleishman emphasises in his adaptation, this particular future demands an awful lot of forgetting. Similar to the conclusion of the *Oresteia*, *In the City of Paradise* dramatises the tension between historical memory and amnesia in relation to the development of a new political community.⁵

The Furies fight against forgetting on behalf of the Antigones, Agaves, Electras and Clytemnestras of this world, if I may make the jump from tragic characters to real people here; on behalf of the “real bodies and real lives of those in whose name the new nation, the reconciled community, was imagining itself into being” (Grunebaum 2002: 307). As I have suggested, their lamentations are more than just an expression of vengeance. They are also an attempt to preserve a memory of the past, which does not accord with the new historical and political narrative.

Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) helps to shed light on this historiographical quality of lamentation. In his *Thesis VII* he calls on historical materialism to take a radically different approach to history from traditional historicism, recognising that “[w]hoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (2007: 256). Because historicism solely writes history from the standpoint of the victors, it has ignored the victims and has encumbered the ability to mourn them. As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian describe in the introduction

⁵ Benedict Anderson gets at a similar tension in his discussion of processes of nation-building, where he describes the important role not only of remembering, but also of forgetting in imagining communities (2003).

to their edited volume *Loss: the Politics of Mourning* (2003), Benjamin's *Theses* are a treatise on "the political and ethical stakes of mourning remains—mourning what remains of lost histories as well as histories of loss" (1). Looking back at Loraux's concept of the mourning voice with Benjamin in mind helps to specify that that voice has implications exceeding the individuality of the grieving subject. Precisely because it contains the possibility of writing those lost histories, those histories of loss, the mourning voice entails politics and history as well.

GENDERED LAMENTS

I have insisted on the importance of recognising mourning as a political and historiographical practice. Having revisited the plays discussed so far in this study to delineate what is at stake in mourning, let me now turn to Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*. If, in the reworkings of *Antigone* and the *Bacchae*, the mourning voice remains relatively soft-spoken, its struggle to be heard is explicitly dramatised in the adaptations of the *Oresteia*. In *Women of Owu*, finally, the mourning voice takes centre stage.

To view lamentation as a historiographical genre, as I have advocated, means to destabilise the traditional binary opposition between history as masculine, written, and superior, and memory as feminine, oral, and inferior. In the Western tradition, Susanne Baackmann explains, this distinction can be traced back to Plato, who defined memory as female and knowledge as male (2000: 272). For the Yoruba such a clear distinction does not exist. Although written culture has become increasingly important in Yoruba life, historical consciousness remains an oral consciousness to a considerable extent. "Remembered" history is handed down from one generation to another through traditions of origin, myths, folk songs, proverbs, (praise) songs and ritual ceremonies (Oyebade 2004: 52). In *Women of Owu* the importance of orality is highlighted by the many songs it contains. The play opens with the singing of the chorus of women. The subsequent five scenes are infused by ritual songs. In an appendix to the published text, Osofisan includes Yoruba and English transcriptions of these songs, consisting largely of dirges (songs of mourning or lament), bride chants and *oriki* (praise poems). He explains that the songs are "heavily based on the corresponding generic structures of traditional Yoruba music" (68).

Through song, the women of Owu lament their fate. The armies of the Yoruba kingdoms Ijebu and Ife have destroyed their city and slaughtered their husbands and sons. The women have been taken as slaves and concubines. Together they express their despair: They sing of *Alagangan*, Death, who has "Come with his wares/ Has brought his merchandise of pain/ Death of course is what he sells/ And none of us can refuse to buy" (69). In the song *Lesí ma gbawa o*, "Who will save us?," they despair "Who shall we hang on to?! Owu's bridge has collapsed! The fire of war has broken

out!” (69-70). In yet another, they lament, “Where are we going/ But to the house of slavery?/ We’ve cried our eyes dry/ All to no avail/ We’re tired of life/ To the point of suicide” (72).

Osofisan’s stress on the suffering of women in war resembles Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. Of all surviving Greek tragedies, *Trojan Women* most powerfully shows “the other side” of war, focusing on Trojans rather than Greeks, on women rather than men. In the context of ancient Greece, where citizenship was exclusively male, Euripides’ focus on women is remarkable. Yet, as I try to show, this feat should not be taken at face value. Let me briefly turn to Euripides’ text and look at a lamentation of Hecuba, the queen of Troy and the spokesperson for the Trojan women:

Oh misery, misery! Am I not in anguish, and should I not lament when my homeland, my children, my husband are no more? ... What should I leave unsaid, what tell to the world? What should I lament? You wretched wives of Trojan warriors and you virgin brides of the spear, Ilium is consigned to smoke. Let us lament her. (2004: 186-7)

Hecuba expresses her suffering on behalf of all the women of Troy. They are solely described, however, as “wives of Trojan warriors” and “virgin brides of the spear.” The main object of the lamentations are not so much or not only they, but rather the men in relation to which they define themselves, as well as the civic community of Ilium (Troy) for which their husbands have been sacrificed. As argued by Arlene W. Saxonhouse, a specialist in ancient political thought, *Trojan Women* “is about the wives of Homeric heroes, but it is the model of the epic hero ... that gives direction to the play. And it is this model which has caused the women so much suffering that they nevertheless continue to accept.” The painful thing, Saxonhouse continues, is that the Trojan women will perform the same task as slaves to the Greeks as they performed as wives in Troy: “transferred from one political community to another, they lose status, but do not change roles” (1980: 74-75).

Through their laments of fallen cities, husbands and sons, the Trojan women may help to write the history of the vanquished, while other histories, including their own, remain unwritten. As I discussed in the previous chapter, something similar happened at the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which many women testified about the suffering of their loved ones, only indirectly addressing their own experiences of violence. Crucially, the lamenting heroines who figure in Greek tragedy were historically played by male citizens, which further complicates an understanding of the mourning voice as unequivocally representational of an overlooked female experience. As Zeitlin explains, in tragedy man could explore the masculine self through investigating the female other. Women may well figure prominently, but “*functionally*, ... are never an end in themselves.” Rather, they play

the role of “catalysts, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers, sometimes helpers or saviors for the male characters” (1985: 67, emphasis in text). As Hecuba’s lament demonstrates, the genre of lamentation is traditionally constituted in the female realm, yet reflects a male-dominated civic and political context.

Considering *Trojan Women* as a theatrical performance in fifth-century BC Athens sheds further light on this. As they speculate as to where the Greek generals will take them, the Trojan women distinguish between Theseus’ Athens and Athens’ traditional enemy Sparta: “if only we might go to the land of Theseus, famed and fortunate! But never to the swirling Eurotas, loathsome dwelling of Helen, to face slavery under Menelaus, sacker of Troy” (2004: 188). The women decide that they would rather end up in Athens than Sparta. For Athenian spectators, to hear their city described as “famed and fortunate” would remind them of the superior status of their city. *Trojan Women* is more about Athens than about Troy or, more precisely, more about Athenian men than about Trojan women.

Rebecca Saunders explains that the gendering of lamentation is not restricted to ancient Greece. In most cultures mortuary labour has been divided by gender, with women having a more physical relation with death, bearing responsibility for the preparation of the body for burial and for visiting graves (2007: 54). Lamentation is marked by gender mostly, Saunders states, by its “unmanly grief, its ‘hysteria’—a motif one encounters in ancient laws as well as in modern descriptions of trauma” (54). Loraux relates that the Athenian statesman Solon is said to have passed laws to regulate the “female excess” of lamentation rituals in the sixth century BC. Women’s lamentations in funeral practices were eventually displaced by the state funeral oration, expressing a rhetoric of mourning celebrating glory in death (2002: 18-19). The regulation of mourning, in other words, was connected to the development of the polis. As I will address below, contemporary contexts such as that of the United States since “9/11” demonstrate that this connection is not restricted to classical times.⁶

While mourning can be viewed as a form of history writing, it warrants the same caution as other historiographical practices. It is vital to distinguish its alleged subjects and objects from real ones; to question who really mourns and who or what is really mourned; and to review whose voice we actually hear and whose stories are actually being told. This too applies beyond ancient Greece. Mourning rituals in traditional West-African societies as Yorubaland, Marie-Antoinette Sossou explains, are more about exalting the position of the dead men than allowing an outlet for the women’s grief (2002: 202-203).⁷ Since Osofisan also evokes the contexts of Iraq and the United

⁶ See Gail Holst-Warhaft’s discussion of the changed attitude towards mourning in late sixth- and fifth-century Athens (1992: 99-126). See also my discussion of amnesia in Chapter Four.

⁷ Sossou also explains that in Yoruba societies mourning widows are often pressed into a humiliating social role, so that widowhood becomes far more than a period of personal grief or of remembrance, but also of hardship and deprivation (2002: 203).

States' "war on terror" (I expand on this below), the question who mourns and is mourned resonates there as well. Benjamin's call to write the histories of the victims to counter that of the victors is imperative, yet the definition of who counts as victim and who does not entails a politics of hierarchy, either in terms of gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity or race.

Osofisan's *Women of Owu* displays awareness of the politics of mourning. One difference with its Euripidean source text is that the lamenting women of Owu focus on *their* stories rather than praising their heroes or city. Like the women of Troy, they narrate history; unlike the women of Troy, the histories they sing are primarily their own. They describe how they saw their husbands, brothers and sons slaughtered in front of their eyes:

WOMAN: Not one was spared! Not a single male left now
In Owu, except those who escaped the night before
With our king, Oba Akinjobi.

...

WOMAN: And—shame, oh shame! Our women were seized
And shared out to the blood-spattered troops
To spend the night. Only some of us—we two, and
The women you see over there
Were spared, those of us from the noble houses
And others whose beauty struck their eye:
We are being reserved, they say, for the Generals. (3)

The women convey the pain of not being allowed to bury their loved ones and refer to the sexual violence, of which many women become the victim in situations of war. As the doctors Leslie Shanks and Michael J. Schull explain, sexual violence is often used as a war strategy, a way to spread terror and fear among the population, and as a form of ethnic cleansing, forcing women to bear children that have been "cleansed" by the rapist's blood (2000: 1152). In his analysis of the stigmatisation of children born of rape victims after the Biafran War (1967-1970), the sociologist Adediran Daniel Ikuomola explains that those children were often seen as bad omens. Many were given names that denoted the circumstances of their birth, such as Okwuo ("war"), Okwuoimose ("ugly face of war") and Okwodiaghe ("war is not worth watching"). Those names often added to the children's stigmatisation.⁸

One of the most heart-breaking laments in *Women of Owu* is uttered by Erelu at the moment when the soldiers bring in the corpse of her grandson Aderogun, the counterpart of Astyanax in *Trojan Women*. Erelu's lament takes the form of an

⁸ Comparably, after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda the estimated five thousand children that were born to women as a result of rape became known *enfants mauvais souvenir*, children of bad memories (Shanks and Schull 2000: 1152-1153).

oriki, of which the English transcript is included as an appendix to the published text. An *oriki* is a type of attributive name that the Yoruba give to a newly-born child, expressing what a child is or what it is hoped he or she will become (Ajila 2004: 143).⁹ More generally, the term refers to praise chants or recitations of achievements, providing historical or biographical information to a person or a person's group or group ancestry. *Oriki* are uttered at births and at different kinds of ritual festivals. At funerals, they function as a ritual valediction of the deceased and as a celebration of the ancestors with whom the deceased will now be reunited. They are multi-functional forms of expression, articulating self-awareness and identity, performing memory and history (Ajila 2004: 143). *Oriki* are commonly sung by women and reflect a clear gender division in content: while those for women often emphasise endearment, those for men commonly connote heroic qualities (Barber 1984: 503; Ajila 2004: 143).

Accordingly, Erelu celebrates her murdered grandson in *Women of Owu* as a "brave one," as the "son of the warrior Jagunmolu," who is a "collector of heads except the newborn's" (77). Ironically, the mourning of Aderogun, a victim of war, simultaneously constitutes a celebration of the bravery and warfare of his ancestry. I address below how this logic, which Erelu considers the logic of war, is addressed when, towards the end of the play, the god Anlugbua intervenes. Erelu chants: "You become my father today!/ When you get home, give them my greetings" (77). Through the funeral ritual, Aderogun will be reunited with his ancestors.

In *Trojan Women*, when Astyanax (the child of Trojan prince Hector and Andromache) is killed by the Greeks, queen Hecuba laments as follows: "If you had died in your city's defence, a married man in your prime, having tasted the joys of kingship that make men rival the gods, then happiness would have been yours, if there is any happiness in such things" (2004: 213). In ancient Greece, a soldier's death was considered to be glorious and the public mourning of such deaths served to inspire civic idealism (Holst-Warhaft 1992: 17). In Erelu's lament of Aderogun in *Women of Owu*, the celebration of his ancestry's heroism seems primarily intended commemoratively. Still, Adeleke Adeeko, a specialist in Yoruba literature, calls for an understanding of *oriki* and oral poetry in general as not only social and historical but also ideological texts that reproduce the views of the ruling sections of societies (2001: 191). Perhaps the celebration of warfare in Aderogun's *oriki* similarly reaffirms specific Yoruba values.

As the women of Owu prepare Aderogun's body for burial, they sing a dirge. Its title translates as "If I'd known, I'd not have come to the world":

⁹ Karin Barber explains that in Yoruba culture, names not only hold but also live out meaning. The activity of naming is therefore thought of as being effectual, for by uttering someone's *oriki* one can call upon or unlock hidden powers (1984: 503).

A woman gives birth and begins to cry
 As nursing mothers rejoice, war breaks out
 The (mother of) twins will soon be mourning
 refrain:
 The handsome turn sacrifice to the god of war
 The brave go to battle and never return
 Why have children then, if they won't last? (76)

While Aderogun's oriki praises bravery in war, the dirge that immediately follows emphasises the loss that bravery involves, particularly for the mothers boys and men leave behind. The reference to twins in the third line adds weight to the hardship. Since the Yoruba see twins as special children who bring fortune to the family, their death contrasts starkly to the promise of their birth (Ajila 2004: 143).

For the women of Owu, song is not only a form of expression, but also holds active potential. They sing to regain power from the men who have hurt them. This is especially clear in the following exchange between the chorus of women and the chorus leader:

CHORUS LEADER: Sing! Sing! In defiance of their whips!
 WOMEN: We curse you all!
 CHORUS LEADER: Of their insults!
 WOMEN: We curse you all!
 CHORUS LEADER: Of their rapine and assault!
 WOMEN: We curse you all!
 CHORUS LEADER: Our curse on all men, and especially men of violence!
 WOMEN: We curse you all!
 CHORUS LEADER: All those born of women, but who use us as dogs!
 WOMEN: We curse you all! (38)

As the stage directions specify, the women then start a ritual song of malediction, which reaches its highpoint as they bare their breasts and utter their curse (38). Mourning turns into resistance.

Significantly, the audience not only learns of the stories of the women of Owu, but also the story of Iyonloye from Ife, the counterpart of the figure of Helen. In Greek myth, Helen is said to be the cause of the Trojan War, which was started by her husband King Menelaus after the Trojan prince Paris had taken her away with him. Helen thus embodies the conflict between Greek and Trojan. In Osofisan's rendition, the Owu war started when Ife General Okunade's "favorite wife" Iyulonoye was captured and given to one of the Owu princes, Erelu's son (6). What happens to Iyulonoye resembles what happens to Helen in the Greek tradition: all responsibility for the war is put on her shoulders. She alone is to blame.

In Euripides, Helen emphasises the difference between Greek self and Trojan other. Comparably, in Osofisan Erelu insists on the differences between Iyunloye and the women of Owu. This is especially clear in the scene where Iyunloye tries to convince her husband that she did not go to Owu with prince Dejumó (the counterpart of Paris) voluntarily but was forced. Erelu (Dejumó's mother) responds fiercely:

ERELU: Confess, you liked my son, and
You liked this city! ... Besides,
Who would rather live in backward Ile-Ife than the city
Of Owu, if given the choice? When you gave yourself up
in Apomu, and were brought here to Owu, you saw suddenly
Such wonder as you had never imagined. Crowds that made you
Dizzy; the silk on the women, coral beads on our neck,
Gold in our hair! You were dazzled! Confess! (54-55)

Erelu's version of history sharply distinguishes between the women of Owu, legitimate victims of war and sexual violence, and Iyunloye from Ife, who "gave herself up" voluntarily. Iyunloye responds:

IYUNLOYE: Yes, be cruel! Be arrogant! Boast of your riches,
Of your dazzling streets! So Ife is backward! Go on,
Jeer at us because we are a minority people!
...
But you and your chiefs always claimed, before this,
Didn't you, that we are one and the same people in all of
Yorubaland? So this is what you meant: the monkey
Does the work, while the baboon eats the food! (55-56)

Osofisan points here to the intra-ethnic strife that persists among Yoruba subgroups in South-West Nigeria. These conflicts, Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo explains, usually reflect unresolved issues from the Yoruba Wars of the nineteenth century (2010: 1). Dramatising the conflict between Owu and Ife, Osofisan also demonstrates that what is seen as a unified "Yoruba" ethnic identity is a construct. The people of south-western Nigeria, the Benin republic and Togo, who are today all referred to as "Yoruba," were until the late nineteenth century organised in independent polities, to which different ethnic designations referred (Waterman 1990: 369). The emergence of the modern pan-Yoruba identity was largely the result of British colonialism, which organised its administration in a way that shaped ethnic communities as well as "modes of ethnic political mobilization and organization" (Berman 1998: 312-313).¹⁰ The image of a

¹⁰ Waterman explains that another major role was played by repatriated slaves, "the Saro—educated at mission schools in Sierra Leone—and the Amaro—*emancipados* from Brazil and Cuba," who provided "paradigms of a modern black culture grounded in indigenous tradition yet oriented toward the wider world" (1990: 370).

unified Yoruba people, Waterman explains, has become increasingly strong, mostly because “the nascent sense of belonging to a larger cultural collectivity has been catalyzed by external perspectives introduced through regional and international political and economical networks” (1990: 369-70, 372).

When Iyunloye finally does get the chance to tell her own story, she explains her predicament to her husband:

When the Owu forces attacked us at the market
 At Apomu, you were not around, remember?
 ... There was no one I could call upon for help!
 You must have heard what the soldiers did to us,
 You are now a soldier yourself!
 They sacked our stalls, looted our wares,
 Killed the men and—what they did to the women!
 In desperation, I had to buy my life with the only asset
 I had—my beauty! It’s the truth, my husband! (51-52)

Iyunloye’s story once more points to the vulnerability of women and girls during war and civil conflict. Iyunloye, Osofisan seems intent on stressing, is not so different from the women of Owu and suffers as they do. The confrontation between Iyunloye and Erelu demonstrates that the women of Owu are not the only victims, nor are they only victims: Erelu is complicit in the abuse of power and the exploitation of fellow Yoruba. According to her, this is simply “the logic of war, the logic of defeat”; it is simply “the fate of the conquered to toil for the strong!” (55). This logic is repeated throughout the play and conveys the arbitrariness of war. While so far the audience has been invited to empathise with Erelu’s predicament, they now find out she has presented them with only one side of a complex story.

Focusing on Iyunloye’s suffering, Osofisan also accomplishes something more, which specifically relates to the politics of adaptation. He challenges Helen’s traditional representation as the root rather than a victim of war. Thus, he questions the conventional Western definition of female archetypes, in which Helen is objectified by men and “used as an excuse in the history from which she is so carefully excluded” (Komar 2003: 7).¹¹ Osofisan thus achieves something similar to Fleishman and Farber with their refigurations of Helen’s sister Clytemnestra in their reworkings of the *Oresteia*: a two-directional relationship between pre-text and adaptation, challenging not so much the pre-text itself as it does the tradition that has appropriated it as its cultural legitimisation.

¹¹ Even Athena in the *Oresteia* fits into this logic. Komar discusses how in Athena the roles traditionally given to women as nurturing mother and wife are “transformed into a wise warrior whose nurturing goes not to the domestic, the personal child, but rather to the public, the polis itself,” so that ultimately “the female is co-opted for what were male purposes in the classical world.” But though Athena upholds the civic, male order against the female, by having Athena as their protectress, the male Athenian population was forced to contemplate the role of women in their society (2003: 9-10).

RE/MEMBERING THE PAST

Erelu's selective memory is a good example of the "distorted consciousness" that for Osofisan characterises the Nigerian predicament (1998: 15-16). As I discussed in Chapter Two, this consciousness largely entails a distorted *historical* consciousness, creating a cultural identity based on a twisted version of the past and hence disabling future change. For Osofisan, political change depends on the reconsideration of history, an approach that he characterises as "post-Négritude" to signal a relation of both continuation and disruption with Négritude. For Osofisan, "Post-Négritude" does not adhere to Négritude's "wilful mystification of the African past," but it does not reject the past either. Rather, it demands

a critical attitude to the exhumation of our heritage, such that such remembrance will not just present our culture as a static, nostalgic monument, but rather as a dynamic process, hybrid, and sometimes even self-contradicting. Thus it is a rejection of the past which is at the same time a more authentic reappropriation of it; so that while Négritude remembers, post-Négritude *re/members*. ... Perhaps the time has come, urgently, to turn away from the glamour of postcolonialism, into the grit and dust of post-Négritude, in order to have a proper apprehension of the present reality of the African continent. (1999b: 9-10, emphasis in text)

The past is not a given script but a process: always with one foot in the present, always in need of reconsideration. The present's relation with the past is not so much defined as an act of remembering but rather as an ongoing process of "*re/membering*": tearing the past away—as it were: dismembering it—from the present that contains it so as to view both past and present anew. "*Re/membering*" is not about reclaiming a lost cultural and historical identity, but about reconstruction.¹²

Osofisan's view of history as *re/membering* has similarities to Benjamin's historical materialist conception of history. Rather than "telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" or "muster[ing] a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time," as does traditional historicism, the historical materialist should regard history as a "constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one," a construction that exists only in the present and that is in need of constant revision (2007: 262-263). Benjamin bases his concept of history on what he describes as "Messianic time," when past and future coincide in an instantaneous present, a present which "comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement." In this structure the historian "recognizes the sign of the Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary change in the fight for the

¹² Osofisan's *re/membering* recalls Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), in which the character Sethe uses the word "rememory" to refer to an active process of remembering and reimagining memory.

oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history” (263).

Benjamin thus closely links history with politics, arguing that change is dependent on disrupting history in the present. Only by brushing history against the grain it becomes a site of political struggle, and history’s redemptive function depends on that struggle (2007: 257). It redeems both the past and the present. The latter, so Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin explains, “reveals itself as being the possible fulfilment of that earlier promise—a promise which could have been lost for all time, which can still be lost if it is not discovered and inscribed in the lineaments of the present” (quoted in Löwy 2005: 41).¹³ Benjamin demonstrates that the need to remember past violence and the promise of future change are not incommensurable but dialectically related: the latter both depends on and is already inscribed in the former. This is precisely what *Women of Owu* conveys.

Osofisan’s dramaturgy is characterised by the awareness of the need to revisit the past and one’s own role in it. The women of Owu, however, do not yet recognise this need and see themselves as the passive victims of a history determined by their ancestral gods. Hence Erelu’s claim that “against the pettiness/ Of gods and goddesses, we have no defence” (37). Significantly, Osofisan displaces the dialogue of the gods from the start of the play to the prologue of the third act. While Euripides informs his audience from the start that the mortals are at the mercy of the gods, Osofisan makes clear that the gods stand by helplessly while humans hold responsibility (Götrick 2008: 88). That the gods are dependent on the humans is also clear from the god Anlugbua’s worry that “without a shrine, without worshippers, what is a god?” (9). As discussed in Chapter Three, this interdependency of humans and gods is characteristic of the Yoruba belief system. When the women ask their ancestral father Anlugbua for help, he offers them the following proverb: “a father can only chew for a child; he cannot swallow for her” (65). As in most of the plays that I have discussed, the emphasis is not on divine resolution, but human agency.

The distorted historical consciousness and lack of responsibility of the Owu community is reflected by their rendition of the start of the war. In the scene between the gods Lawumi and her son Anlugbua, which draws on the scene between Athena and Poseidon in *Trojan Women*, the people of Owu turn out to be partly responsible for the war themselves. They became “drunk with prosperity” and ended up “selling/ Other Yoruba into slavery!” (19). The Owu women not only await their own fates as slaves, their community has been actively involved in slavery as well. Osofisan takes this theme from Euripides, but different from Euripides, he not only poses slavery as the outcome of war, but also as its cause (Götrick 2008: 88). Historically, slavery

¹³ As Löwy rephrases, “the present illuminates the past and the illuminated past becomes a force in the present” (2005: 39).

was indeed at the start of the Owu war. One of the main reasons Yoruba kingdoms fought against each other was to take prisoners to sell as slaves to the British. Olatunji Ojo explains that the Owu war began when Ife violated a law that precluded the enslavement of Oyo citizens. When captives from war were sold to Ijebu slave traders, Owu soldiers rescued them. In retaliation Ife and Ijebu troops attacked Owu for trying to stop the lucrative trade (2005: 5). The women have carefully left this complicity in the slave trade out of their lamentations.

As the play progresses it becomes increasingly clear that the Owu have employed a strategy of amnesia that can be compared to ancient Greece. In the previous chapter I discussed how in fifth-century BC Athens it was deemed important to remember conquest but to forget, and thus not lament, defeat. Too much wailing about past suffering would harm Athens' self-image as a glorious centre of power; memory and mourning were strictly controlled (Loraux 2002: 18-19). Osofisan's women do lament, expressing their suffering. But the history they perform through their lamentations is partly fraudulent. Their ancestral god Anlugbua blames them for this:

If only you had read your history right, the lessons
Left behind by the ancestors! Each of us, how else did we go
Except by the wrath of war? Each of us,
Demolished through violence and contention! Not so?
But you chose to glorify the story with lies! Lies!
Our apotheosis as you sing it is a fraud! (65)

Mourning certain histories entails the danger of forgetting, silencing or distorting others. Lamentation is not only able to express alternative histories, but it is also inevitably selective and open to manipulation.

The women defend themselves by objecting that it is not they, the "common fool," but "the rulers who write history"; it is "the hunters who compose the story of the hunt," the revellers, not the slaughtered cows, Who record the fable of the feast!" (66). They present themselves as victims of historicism, reducing the histories they sing to a mere echo of the dominant narrative to which they have no access. The god Anlugbua simply replies that "Then the deer must train themselves to seize the gun from/ The hunters! The cows to take over the narration of/ Their own story," urging them to take matters into their own hands and compose their own history (66). This is a valuable lesson in self-emancipation.

Surprisingly, while gender has been prominent in the play so far, it is now relegated to the background. Power is re-defined in terms of class, as the inequality between the "common fool" and "the rulers" attests. The women are no longer addressed as women, but become the representatives of a collective that is co-responsible for a history of warfare. On the one hand, they are thus transformed from passive victims to possible

agents of change, which correlates with Osofisan's desire to give women a more active role in history. As the playwright Tess Akaeke Onwueme notes, Osofisan has transformed modern Nigerian drama by portraying women as harbingers of social reconstruction rather than docile personalities, witches or prostitutes (1988: 25). On the other hand, however, to disregard gender when talking about wars that generate gendered violence seems problematic, especially with consideration of the history of colonial and military violence in Nigeria, of which so many women have become victims.

The transformation of queen Erelu displays a similar dilemma. It suggests a change from passive victim to agent of social change. Until now, without her royal status to protect her and without a man in relation to whom she can define herself, Erelu has felt unable to stand by herself: "I am not the widow of a hero. Only an old woman/ With fallen breasts. Without this stick to lean on,/ I could not stand alone by myself" (25). But towards the end of the play the chorus of women remind her that, as the "mother of the city" and "the only Mouth" they have left to speak to their ancestors, Erelu has the duty to perform the necessary burial rites so that the spirits of the dead may be released and sent back home (61-62). This inspires her to abandon her passivity and play an active part again. Together the women start their ritual dances:

... For those who fell in the field of slaughter
 ... For all who fell to feed the greed of power
 ... For all the innocent silenced in their prime,
 silenced so that someone could win an argument
 ... For the numerous souls wasted again and again
 In the ceaseless clash of liberty and lust
 ... For the widows and orphans who survive
 But who will soon be drawn into fresh confrontations
 ... For the numerous ghosts we leave behind
 For the bodies abandoned on these broken bricks (64)

Through song and dance the women perform a valediction of the dead and summon their ancestor Anlugbua. He takes possession of Erelu and delivers the play's final message. He predicts that the women of Owu will go into years of wandering and slavery "[a]s the penalty for your wasted lies." Hopefully, after that they will "have learnt the wisdom/ Of sticking together, and loving one another..." (66). The message Osofisan gives to his audience is unambiguous:

Poor human beings! War is what will destroy you!
 As it destroys the gods. But I am moved, and I promise:
 Owu will rise again! Not here,
 Not as a single city again ...
 ... but in little communities elsewhere,
 Within other cities of Yorubaland. Those now going

Into slavery shall start new kingdoms in those places.
It's the only atonement a god can make for you
Against your ceaseless volition for self-destruction.
You human beings, always thirsty for blood,
Always eager to devour one another! I hope
History will teach you. I hope you will learn. Farewell. (67)

The migration Anlugbua predicts has a historical basis. After the Owu war and the fall of the Oyo empire, the migration of Yoruba refugees resulted in the rapid expansion of the settlement of Ibadan, which grew to be the second-largest city in Nigeria and the capital of the Oyo state. David Richards observes a correspondence between Owu and Troy, comparing the founding story of Ibadan with that of Rome, which in Virgil's account was founded by the descendants of Aeneas, a refugee from Troy (2007: 354). Although Anlugbua restricts his predicted migration to "other cities in Yorubaland," it could well refer to the Yoruba diaspora. During the transatlantic slave trade many Yoruba were taken as slaves to different parts of the "New world."

Only through Erelu are the women of Owu able to communicate with their ancestors and receive Anlugbua's lesson. While Erelu has so far refused to take responsibility and blamed the gods instead, she is now transformed into a queen who saves her people. That it is not Erelu but the god Anlugbua who speaks does not make her a mere instrument. As indicated, in the Yoruba tradition gods are dependent on the humans and cannot exist without them. Nonetheless, once Anlugbua's spirit leaves her body, Erelu dies (unlike Hecuba in Euripides), so that the moral with which the play concludes is at the expense of her life. Erelu's death raises the concern whether or not her story is in the end quite similar to the stories of Antigone in *The Island*, Tegonni in *Tegonni: an African Antigone* and Agave in *Euripides' Bacchae: a Communion Rite*. Although Erelu's mourning has been loudly voiced, much like them she is sacrificed for the sake of her community, and much like them she is not given the chance to become a real subject of the historical change she brings about. Her mourning voice recedes to the background as the final message of the play reaches its crescendo.

THE PROMISE OF CHANGE

I have tried to demonstrate that lamentation is more than an expression of grief, that it is not an isolated discursive act and inevitably reflects the politics in which it is inscribed. It may write alternative histories as well as serve as a site of containment and manipulation. But while my emphasis so far has been on lamentation as a representational genre, it is equally important to consider its performative potential to challenge the structures it is intended to affirm. This potential is suggested by the practice's place in Greek tragedy. The genre appropriated lamentation in a way that

reaffirmed the glory of Athens (the glory lamentation outside of the theatre might threaten), but simultaneously functioned as the qualified artistic realm in which mourning could still find some expression, performed in ways that possibly questioned Athens' socio-political order.

In many ways, lamentation reinforces traditional gender roles, Rebecca Saunders notes, for instance, that the practice correlates women to the “irrational, primitive, animalistic, improper and foreign.” Yet, it can also be a “provocative site of gender non-conformity,” which grants women “a public presence and social power that is often reserved for men; while lamenting, women are allowed to play otherwise masculinized roles: they are revenge seekers, judges, bearers of authority, *writers of history*” (2007: 58, emphasis added). In ancient Greece, male actors played female roles on stage, performing an act of cross-dressing that may have challenged the gender binary it was meant to reaffirm. According to Zeitlin, however, this subversive potential should not be overstated. Although the presence of the feminine in Greek tragedy may have temporarily destabilised gender roles, initiating actors and spectators into “new and unsettling modes of feeling, seeing, and knowing,” tragedy ultimately reasserted male authority (1985: 86-87).

A similar caution seems in order with regard to the place of mourning in Greek tragedy. Several theorists argue that, as a result of the restriction of public mourning, Athens “channelled the passions of lament into its two great rhetorical inventions, the funeral speech and the tragedy”; tragedy can be seen as the “genre of devastating loss” that compensated for “the loss of loss” (Holst-Warhaft 1992: 10; Honig 2009: 12). Yet even within the theatre, the extent to which mourning could be enacted seems to have been limited. Loraux relates the anecdote of tragedian Phrynichus, who had to pay a fine for staging his tragedy *The Capture of Miletus* about the Greek defeat at Miletus by the Persians, because it caused emotional distress among the Athenian audience. Seeing this recent event re-enacted, so Herodotus recounts, the audience had collectively burst into tears and this outburst of emotion was not appreciated (Loraux 1998: 85-86; 2002: 42-43). The problem, Loraux explains, was that the Athenians identified too closely with the Miletans and were made to recall their own misfortunes. Tragedy required distance; mourning the other was not supposed to transform into a mourning of the Greek self. With his *Trojan Women*, Euripides seems to have tested the limits of what was sanctioned by the polis.

It is tempting to turn the issue of Greek tragedy's political potential into one of either/or: either tragedy does hold the power to challenge dominant formations, or it does not. The logic depends on situating tragedy entirely within or outside of society. Instead, as Michelle Gellrich convincingly argues, the vitality of tragedy should be linked with a place that is “neither totally within nor totally without the *polis*.” The genre should be understood as “neither simply ideological nor purely nonideological”

but as “a performance opening up some space in between” (1995: 48). Because the genre is never purely oppositional, tragedy holds the potential not of simply subverting the social order (and thus maintaining a similar binary logic), but of dismantling its very structure (1995: 48).¹⁴ Gellrich’s emphasis on “inbetweenness” is crucial for regarding tragedy’s relation to politics; then again, even the term “dismantle” may overestimate tragedy’s effect on society. I would suggest that tragedy has the potential of revealing and probing the social structure to which it is dialogically related, eliciting awareness of this structure to begin with. This awareness may result in the dismantling of the social order; tragedy holds change as a promise but never a guarantee.¹⁵

The Athenian spectators of *Trojan Women* might not only have left the theatre contemplating Athens’ superiority, but aware of the political structure on which this superiority relied. To see the story of Greek conquest and non-Greek defeat could have inspired them to reflect on Athens’ behaviour in the rebellious colony of Melos only a year before, when the Greeks had brutally murdered all the men and sold the women and children into slavery. To see Trojan women act nobly and Greeks act barbarically might for some have undermined the division between Greek self and barbarian other. It is difficult to move beyond speculation here, but I share the suspicion of Martha Nussbaum that compassion for Troy may have caused moral unease among Euripides’ audience, reminding Athenians of “the full and equal humanity of people who live in distant places” (2003: 11). Euripides’ recourse to the Trojan War may have been a way to circumvent Athens’ ban on memory and cleverly conceal his criticism of Athens’ present war involvement.

Nussbaum continues her discussion of compassion by asking an essential question:

Did compassion really enable the Greeks to comprehend the real humanity of others, or did it stop short, allowing them to reaffirm the essential Greekness of everything that’s human? Of course compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar, so that Greeks could see their own vulnerability in them, and feel terror and pity, as for their own relations. But it’s easy for the familiarization to go too far: they are just us, and we are the ones who suffer humanly. Not those other ones, over there in Melos (2003: 11).

In a context in which grief had been banished, the grief of the defeated Trojan other might have been a way for Athenians to mourn themselves. Nussbaum’s comment also has relevance with regard to representations of Africa, so often described or defined

¹⁴ As Gellrich states, this space may very well be “the Dionysiac,” because Dionysus not so much destroys or confuses distinctions as he “configures the nondifferentiation out of which such distinctions eventually arise” (1995: 54).

¹⁵ For Richard Seaford, the focus on tragic ambiguity—viewing tragedy as contained within the polis whose norms it simultaneously sets out to challenge—is in danger of becoming a cliché. Drawing on the vote of Athena in the *Oresteia*, he argues that it is a controlled ambiguity serving the need of the polis and unable to also undo it (in Goff 1995: 202-223).

as “tragic,” especially in the West. Regardless of the compassion Western audiences may feel when reading the stories and seeing the images of hungry children in Biafra, of slaughtered Tutsis in Rwanda, or of raped women in Darfur, their reading or viewing of them as “tragedies” inevitably confers a form of cathartic externalisation, projected onto a tragic other, of an internal emotion. I am aware that to sum these different contexts up in one phrase like I do here itself entails the danger of suggesting a coherent “tragic” image of “Africa” and glossing over particularities; I do so precisely to call attention to the extent in which the representation of “Africa” in the West is pre-determined by ideas about what “Africa” is thought to represent.

In *Women of Owu* Osofisan engages with the crucial question of how to relate to what is distant and of what is involved in bringing what is distant nearer. Context plays a main part in this. Let me try and explain. Had *Women of Owu* solely referred to Nigeria, the British audience of its premiere might have been involved in a similar cathartic experience as I have depicted above. In that case, the suffering of the women of Owu would have been heartbreakingly tragic but would remain tragically distant at the same time. But Osofisan not only evokes the contexts of Troy, ancient Greece and nineteenth century Yorubaland, but also refers to the war in Iraq, which was invaded by American and British forces the year before in 2003. He does so in a different manner from Yael Farber in *Molara* who, as I discussed, references the “ruins of Baghdad” to voice her criticism of the Bush administration. Although a similar criticism is implicit in Osofisan, he alludes to Iraq not so much to voice his opinion to his audience but rather to trigger critical reflection. Before suggesting what Osofisan’s reference to Iraq might *do*, let me expand on the way in which this reference is included in the text.

At first sight, Osofisan’s reference to Iraq seems casual. After his account of the destruction of Owu, he writes that “it was quite logical therefore that, as I pondered over this adaptation of Euripides’ play, in the season of the Iraqi War, the memories that were awakened in me should be those of the tragic Owu War” (2006: vii). Although Osofisan seems to mention Iraq in passing, the war in Iraq gains presence in the text through allusions. For example, the combined armies of the Yoruba kingdoms that attack Owu are consistently described as the “Allied Forces,” a phrase alluding to US-led coalition forces. Another example is the criticism of the rhetoric of “liberation,” explicit in a woman’s account of the way in which the allied forces attacked Owu under the pretext of liberating the market:

They said our Oba
Was a despot, that they came to free us
From his cruel yoke! (2)

and

Nowadays,
When the strong fight the week, it's called
A Liberation War
To free the weak from oppression. (8)

George Bush used a similar rhetoric to legitimise the invasion of Iraq. Although the *casus belli* for the invasion primarily rested on the allegation that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (which was never proven), Bush repeatedly framed the invasion as a war of liberation, intended to “topple Saddam’s ruthless dictatorship” and grant the Iraqi people freedom and democracy.¹⁶

According to Osofisan’s women of Owu, the Allied Forces “are not interested in such petty things/ As profit,”

WOMAN: Only in lofty, lofty ideas, like freedom—
WOMAN: Or human rights—
WOMAN: Oh the Ijebus have always disdained merchandise—
WOMAN: The Ifes are unmoved by the glitter of gold—
WOMAN: The Oyos have no concern whatsoever for silk or ivory—
WOMAN: All they care for, my dear women
All they care for, all of them, is our freedom!
WOMAN: Ah Anlugbua bless their kind hearts!
WOMAN: Bless the kindness which has rescued us
From tyranny in order to plunge us into slavery!
WOMAN: Sing, my friends! Let us celebrate
Our new-won freedom of chains (2006: 12-13)¹⁷

The women mock the official narrative of “liberation wars” and the rhetorical conflation of democratic ideology and economic interests that characterise that narrative. Their ironic song of the “official” history of the invasion of Owu through negation points to the “profit,” “merchandise” and “glitter of gold” that determine wars and to the stories of slavery and oppression that are their result.

It depends on the audience which of the contexts Osofisan evokes will resonate most. For Nigerian viewers the dramatisation of internal warfare is likely to evoke resonances to other internal conflicts in Nigeria, especially the Biafran War, which resulted in around three million deaths and has left its mark of destruction in many

¹⁶ March 19, 2008 “President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror,” released by the Pentagon, as found online <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/03/20080319-2.html>>, accessed 12 March 2009.

¹⁷ Ijebu was a Yoruba kingdom in pre-colonial Nigeria, which formed around the fifteenth century. Ife is an ancient Yoruba city in southwest Nigeria, probably dating back to 500 AD; the city holds mythical relevance for many Yoruba who claim to have originated here. Oyo is a state of Nigeria, named after the former Oyo Empire, which covered parts of modern-day Nigeria and Benin; Oyo is also the name of a city in Oyo State, founded in the 1830s as the capital of the Oyo Kingdom.

families. The suffering the women recount also resonates with that of so many victims of Nigeria's successive military dictatorships, prompting viewers to reflect on Nigeria's contemporary political situation. The women, in the fragment above, do not refer to the United States, but to the Ijebus, the Ifes and the Oyos, so that their criticism is directed primarily at internal strife within Nigeria.

For the British audience of the play's premiere in 2004, probably largely unfamiliar with Nigeria's history and situation, the allusion to Iraq may have been more prominent. For them, Iraq had become less and less distant since the United Kingdom aided the US-invasion in 2003. With more than eight thousand British soldiers stationed there and recurring headlines of British casualties, the UK's military involvement in Iraq was, and is to date, a topic of much political and public debate. Hearing the women of Owu say that "Nowadays/ When the strong fight the weak, it's called/ A Liberation War/ To free the weak from oppression" may have invited the audience to reflect on the then recent decision of Prime Minister Tony Blair to get involved in the Iraq war. Superimposing the context of Iraq, a context that resonates at home, onto Yorubaland, Osofisan disrupts the possibility for cathartic release, making it more difficult for his British viewers to objectify the "African" suffering on stage. It could be that for some audience members their "familiarity" with the Greek pre-text makes "Africa" less different and less distant. This would be an important achievement, considering how in Western countries, African art and literature is often primarily valued for its "difference."

While the various contexts Osofisan evokes will resonate differently for different audiences, his portrayal of suffering as a condition that transcends those differences insists on a common humanity. It invites audiences to go beyond their own position and challenges the dehumanisation of the other. To me, this is Osofisan's main achievement. He achieves this not by alleging a universal human condition, but by inviting audiences to reflect on their own contexts and on the place of grief, mourning and loss within them. The different singularities he references are placed horizontally in relation to each other, which might make it easier for feelings of loss and compassion that are evoked in one context to transmit to another, distant context.¹⁸ Additionally, by tracing a wider and more diverse context beyond the play's direct situatedness in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, Osofisan makes a point of showing that Africa is part of a larger world and that it is this world, not merely the colonial heritage, with which African literatures are concerned and to which African countries are connected.

A final result of the different contexts and time-lines Osofisan includes is that it becomes impossible to determine the single pre-text to which his play responds. Its complex intertextual and intercontextual framework makes it impossible to identify Euripides' *Trojan Women* as its singular point of origin, so that *Women of Owu*

¹⁸ As Bal explains, singularity is "something transferable: from singular to singular" (forthcoming 32).

works against the unidirectional model of influence between authoritative source and imitative adaptation. *Women of Owu's* variety of pre-texts, about Troy, Owu and Iraq, are each inscribed in different historical contexts and cultural traditions. As Bal explains, the pre-textual story and the story of its present artistic reading “collude and collide” and together produce a new story (1991: 21). *Women of Owu's* intertextual dynamic provides a lens through which all the texts that are referenced, including the Euripidean tragedy, are reflected and refracted to bear upon one another.

MOURNING OTHERS

My discussion has demonstrated the importance of questioning who or what the real object of lamentation is, as well as what the compassion to which it appeals wittingly or unwittingly produces. Numerous examples indicate the need for a critical approach. Nussbaum makes an analogy between Troy and the events of 11 September 2001, the trigger for the 2003 invasion of Iraq: “America’s towers, too, have burned. Compassion and terror now inform the fabric of our lives.” Although many people have extended compassion beyond their usual sphere, it has also become clear, she continues, that humane sentiments increasingly “stop short at the national boundary,” demonstrating “how narrow and self-serving our sense of compassion can sometimes be” (2003: 11-13).¹⁹

Nussbaum draws attention to the danger of public mourning as it may end up appropriating lost lives to celebrate the polis or state and reaffirm the self/other division. This danger is also explored by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*. She warns that:

we have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving, how they sometimes operate in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of others’ lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the derealizing aims of military violence. (2004: 37)

While intended to lament violence, perversely mourning can become a trigger for or instrument of violence itself. Butler identifies a “hierarchy of grief,” in which certain lives are protected while others do not qualify as “grievable” (2004: 32). She questions whether the lives in Afghanistan or other US targets will ever be as human to her as

¹⁹ Michael Naas recalls another compelling example, the televised 1984 Memorial Day of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the Vietnam War. He remembers the “terrifying thought that with this one ceremony all the horror and uncertainty, all the lies and deceptions of Vietnam had been recuperated, lifted up, transformed into a beautiful or glorious death” (2003: 87). His example reminds us of the Greek funeral oration, which similarly celebrated glory in death.

that of American journalist Daniel Pearl, who was murdered by a militant group in Pakistan; whether we will ever “feel compelled to learn how to say these names and to remember them” (37).²⁰ Perhaps the present distance between Afghanistan and the US exceeds that between Troy and Athens in Euripides’ days. Butler addresses the way in which some people, by not being named and by not being recognised as human, are effaced from history. This recalls Benjamin’s observation that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (2007: 255, emphasis in text). Presenting suffering and loss as human experiences that surpass temporal, geographical, socio-political, ethnic, and racial differences, Osofisan attempts to challenge the hierarchy of grief Butler analyses.

Although mourning entails danger, it also entails a promise. This promise is at the heart of Jacques Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of eulogies devoted to deceased friends and colleagues in which he delineates the “unbearable paradox of fidelity” (2001: 159). Derrida suggests that mourning the other is an attempt to incorporate the other’s gaze. However, because the other’s singularity exceeds us, this gaze can never be made our own. Precisely that something that cannot be interiorised, he argues, will remain beyond us as the source of our responsibility (159-161). It is likely that for Euripides’ audience, mourning the Trojan other was a way to reaffirm their sense of self, but perhaps the impossibility of fully incorporating this other also reminded them of their own vulnerability, calling them to responsibility.

Such seems the basis of Butler’s hope that the United States’ loss since the attack on the Twin Towers may also involve the loss of “First World presumption.” From this experience of loss and fragility, “the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerges,” potentially effecting a “transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere,” she concludes (2004: 40). Butler, in short, suggests that something might be gained from grief by maintaining it as part of the political framework for thinking international relations. Neal Curtis rephrases this idea as follows: “grief and mourning open us to the ties that bind us to others, to our relationality and dependency, to the fact that we are constituted heteronymously rather than autonomously, that we are not sovereign” (2007: 875).²¹ Or, as Caruth states it, because one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, it may “lead to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (1996: 8). Mourning

²⁰ “Daniel Pear, ‘Danny’ Pearl,” Butler writes, “is so familiar to me: he could be my brother or my cousin; he is so easily humanized; he fits the frame” and “[h]is story takes me home and tempts me to stay there” Butler reflects. “His story takes me home and tempts me to stay there. But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable?” (2004: 37-38).

²¹ In his article, Curtis considers the war against terror in relation to classical tragedy, in particular Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

others may help to mourn ourselves, but mourning ourselves may also open up the possibility of mourning others. This is what gives Osofisan's *Women of Owu* such force.

It remains unclear, Lessie Jo Frazier observes, what "an adequate space for the labor of mourning would look like, or even if such a space is possible in the midst of the history of state violence" (Bal, Spitzer, Crewe 1999: 110). Indeed, it is difficult to make grand claims about mourning. Located within the structures it might challenge, it can never simply procure a narrative of resistance or subversion. It is in perpetual danger of being manipulated for other purposes, at worst serve as the legitimisation of new violence. However, mourning also entails a promise, a promise that rests on the singular relationships between people. With its immediacy and proximity to spectators, theatre is a powerful medium to establish such relationships. As Loraux notes, it is able to involve spectators in the emotional expressiveness of suffering, addressing them not only in relation to the civic community or polity of which they are part, but first and foremost in terms of their humanity:

... through the evocation of mourning, despite the forgetting prescribed by the city-state, the spectator will be overcome, and purgation will arouse him to transcend his membership in the civic community and to comprehend his even more essential membership in the race of mortals. This has always been the final word sung, not so much to the citizen as to the spectator, by the mourning voice of tragedy. (Loraux 2002: 93)

The mourning voice is not a revolutionary voice, yet it holds the power to speak to people's emotions and appeal to a sense of shared humanity. For this reason it is imperative that the mourning voice be heard.