

Cargo Culture: Literature in an Age of Mass Displacement

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The full implication of the identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose elementary rights were not safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of the nation-state.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Much of what is classified today as the literature of migration does not reflect the conditions of extreme duress of those who are trafficked from one part of the world to another. In many instances, postcolonial theories of hybridity and the literary forms in which such theories are instantiated were the product of elite forms of migration that have little connection to the experience of working-class migrants (Ahmad 2008). Even literary works that are more grounded in mass experience nonetheless reflect the tribulations of first- or second-generation diasporic populations who migrated to the developed nations of Western Europe and the United States *legally*. Such migration was largely a product of what were the now clearly anomalous conditions of labor shortage that obtained for the thirty or so years following World War II and the creation of the postwar social compact between capital, government, and the organized working class within developed nations. In the United States, for example, Congress established the *bracero* contract-labor program, which lasted from the early 1940s through the mid-1960s, in response to such labor shortages; similar guest worker programs were set up in Western European nations such as Germany, France, and Britain after the war (Bacon 2008). While residence was often initially tied to work, the communities who settled

in developed nations, tied to such nations by colonial history, generally ultimately established formal citizenship. Literature produced by writers within this context, from, to take the British context, Sam Selvon's *Lone Londoners* to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, thus deals largely with the efforts of these migrant communities to establish a sense of self and community within nations that recognize their right to residence in formal terms but frequently do not do so in cultural or racial terms. The struggle reflected in such literary works consequently tends to pivot on assertions of belonging that mongrelize the national community (Dawson 2007).

The novel has not been particularly responsive to the growth of displacement on a global scale during the post-Fordist era that began in the 1970s. In his discussion of the dearth of literary representations of migrant workers in the oil industry, for example, Amitav Ghosh suggests that this aporia results not simply because it is in the interest of dominant elites to mute awareness of the political machinations and human rights violations that attend resource extraction. In addition, Ghosh suggests, the novel is constitutionally averse to representing the polyglot communities of labor migrants whose toil in the oil fields of the Middle East keeps crude oil flowing (1992, 30). The novel is tethered to traditions of naturalistic dialogue within monolingual speech communities; within, that is, the nation-state. As Benedict Anderson argued, it is the primary vector for the imagining of stable, bounded communities within the empty time of modernity (2006). The novel also thrives through creating a rich sense of place. The experience of the modern-day helots who populate the shadow economy, however, is lived out in a world that is displaced, heterogeneous, and international. This is a world, Ghosh asserts, that offers "a radical challenge not just to writing but to much of modern culture, to the idea of distinguishable and distinct communities or civilizations" (1992, 30). Ghosh, writing during the first decade of full-blown neoliberal globalization, argues that we do not yet possess literary forms to give true expression to the experiences of global migrants.

In recent years precisely such a literature of displacement has begun to emerge. The denizens of this literary corpus do not possess even the tenuous rights enjoyed by the ethnic minority groups—black Britons, French Muslims, and German Turks, for example—who settled in the developed countries before the onset of neoliberalism in the 1970s. Once they cross national borders, contemporary displaced people are largely denuded of the legal rights that come with national belonging. Lacking formal citizen-

ship, they often are without means to engage in even the forms of subaltern political negotiations described by Partha Chatterjee as “the politics of the governed” (2004). Indeed, for many of these displaced people, the state is even more feared than are the strong men who command power in the shadow economy. Although literary representations of such conditions of displacement share significant similarities with preceding generations of migrant literature, the fundamental outlines of this work are different inasmuch as its protagonists cannot take citizenship for granted. This new literature is, as a result, a form of cargo culture, an aesthetics of people who have been turned into illegal but nonetheless highly profitable cargo at the hands of powerful global syndicates that furnish underground labor where and when necessary.

Yet this is not to say that these often juridically invisible people are without agency. In what follows I discuss Chris Abani’s portrait of one such displaced person in his novel *Becoming Abigail* (2006). Like Ghosh in *Shadow Lines* and Caryl Phillips in *A Distant Shore*, as well as film directors such as Stephen Frears in *Dirty Pretty Things* and Michael Winterbottom in *In This World*, Abani strives to depict the interior world of those who exist outside the established order of nation-states today. Such people are often reduced to the level, as Caroline Moorehead has it, of human cargo (2006). Abani’s novel focuses on the life of a young Nigerian woman who is taken to Britain by a relative and, once there, forced into sexual slavery. *Becoming Abigail* offers important insights into the material and psychological mechanisms through which human trafficking works in the contemporary global economy. Key to the functioning of the shadow economy, the novel suggests, are the forms of psychological abuse and manipulation to which deracinated people are subjected by those who control and profit from them. Yet, as unlikely as it might seem given its subject matter and its intensely dark tone, Abani’s novel is essentially a bildungsroman, a novel of formation in which the protagonist grows into her own skin and into a sense of self-possession despite the many terrible violations to which she is subjected. Through its nuanced narrative of subject formation, Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, like other contemporary novels and films that focus on what I am calling cargo culture, plays out these complexities of agency and its destruction within the shadow economy. Abani’s novel, I argue, consequently offers important lessons about how we may avoid diminishing displaced people’s security by reinscribing gender hierarchies. In addition, by tracing its protagonist’s resistance to the forms of gendered

subordination inherent in the family and in current frameworks of legal citizenship, *Becoming Abigail* represents the struggle for agency of those who are rendered human cargo. The novel thereby offers a tacit injunction for the transformation of belonging on both a symbolic and a juridical level.

(En)Gendering Migration

We live in an age of mass displacement. According to the United Nations Population Division, there are almost two hundred million people—equivalent to the population of Brazil, the world's fifth most populous nation—living outside the countries in which they were born (Munck 2008, 1229). Over the past thirty years, the unraveling of the developmental state in many postcolonial nations, the imposition of structural adjustment programs, free trade agreements, and the many other components of the neoliberal order that David Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession” have led to unparalleled deracination (2003). Displaced peoples may exist in the interstices of the global order of nation-states and recognized citizenship, but the labor provided by the denizens of this shadow economy is vital to the social reproduction of the dominant order. These are the largely invisible people who cook the food, clean the toilets, and provide the many other services, including sexual ones, essential to those who are not unhoused and illegal. The extralegal networks through which they circulate are populated by powerful profiteers and black-market operators, whose tentacles link zones of complete state failure to some of the most developed economies in the world (Nordstrom 2004). Of course, this shadow economy is heavily gendered inasmuch as women do the lion's share of work therein.

Paradigms of migration within the policy establishment, overwhelmingly concerned with issues of security and governance, approach the issue of displacement and border crossing in a decontextualized, highly ethnocentric manner that plays directly into chauvinist nationalist politics. In addition, such approaches tend to downplay issues relating to gender and migration. As Ronaldo Munck explains, “The gendered dimensions of migration are barely understood today, despite the fact that about half of migrants are women” (2008, 1233). Indeed, the state and traditional migration theory have both typically seen women simply as dependents, since men have historically been taken to be the primary breadwinners

(Clarence 2003, 21). Women migrants are thus rendered invisible not simply by xenophobic public discourse but also by dominant academic accounts of migration, which have tended to represent migrants as male and as driven to pull up stakes solely by economic motives (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000, 2). The legal marginalization that follows from patriarchal assumptions concerning women's status is convenient, however, inasmuch as it constrains female migrants to engage exclusively in the forms of flexible labor on which neoliberal globalization depends. Indeed, as Francesca Scrinzi has remarked, the subordination of immigrant women within the underground economy has made their labor into a kind of laboratory of precariousness, where new evasions of employee rights are experimented with before being rolled out to the rest of society (2003, 80).

Human trafficking is perhaps the one aspect of migration in which gender issues are acknowledged to be central. Statistics are notoriously unreliable given the clandestine character of human trafficking, but estimates by the U.S. Department of State suggest that six hundred to eight hundred thousand people are trafficked across international borders annually (Bryant-Davis, Tillman, Marks, and Smith 2009, 70). Although trafficked people often work in sweatshops, in restaurants, on farms, and as private domestic workers, the majority of victims tend to be women and girls who are trafficked for sexual exploitation. The profits of this flesh trade are massive and the penalties relatively few, making human trafficking the third largest source of revenue for organized crime, after drugs and gun running (Bryant-Davis et al. 2009, 70). Attention to trafficking has been growing over the past two decades, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recently reporting that the problem has reached "epidemic proportions" (Hodge and Lietz 2007, 163). Clearly the growth of cargo culture is related to the spread of criminal cartels and the shadow economy in general during the past two decades of full-throttle globalization.

Critics of this recent surge of concern over human trafficking have, however, pointed out that non-European and, in particular, African women are often left out in accounts of the problem (Bryant-Davis 2009, 69). The campaign against sexual trafficking in fact took off only when women from the former Soviet Union, who were recognizably "white," became involved. To a remarkable extent, then, recent campaigns against what is often termed modern-day slavery recapitulate the terms of the crusade against "white slavery" during the early twentieth century. At the time, concern over international human trafficking was framed by

fears for the virtue of virginal young white women, despite the fact that 99 percent of the victims of trafficking were women of color—if, that is, one includes Jewish women, who were classified as nonwhite at the time (Scully 2001, 86).

The relative elision of African women's experiences of human trafficking today is particularly odious given the history of enslavement to which African people have been subject. This elision is even more unconscionable, however, if one considers the factors that tend to catalyze human trafficking. Many African countries, after all, have been particularly dramatically affected by the forms of new enclosure—from structural adjustment programs to vertiginously declining commodities prices—that have characterized the neoliberal era. When women or families are not capable of affording everyday life, the temptation to turn to migration, to one form or another of prostitution, or to some combination of the two is often irresistible (Bryant-Davis 2009, 72). Of course, not all poor countries produce human trafficking rings. A crucial additional ingredient that supplements the feminization of poverty is a link to the global circuits of organized crime. In West African nations such as Nigeria, Chris Abani's natal country, the global drug trade, resource extraction, guerrilla groups, and notoriously corrupt governance on all levels have established precisely such transnational criminal linkages during the decades since independence.

Representing Cargo Culture

Although it focuses explicitly on sexual slavery, Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* does not dwell on the background context behind human trafficking that I have been sketching. The novel does, however, offer an intricate narrative structure that weaves together the global South and North. *Becoming Abigail* shuttles constantly backward and forward between the past and present of a character named Abigail Tansi, a young woman who has been taken to London by Peter, her uncle by marriage. This narrative movement underlines the imbrication of Britain and Nigeria while also forcing the reader to piece together a life lived—and recounted—in fragments. Instead of offering a sociological focus on the factors that catalyze human trafficking, Abani's novel limns the profound sense of personal loss that has shaped Abigail. Her mother lost in childbirth, Abigail is reduced to collecting and even inventing memories of her pugnacious namesake (30). Much of Abigail's childhood seems to be consumed in ritual acts of

mourning for her mother. Abigail's relationship to her mother is rendered even more ambivalent by her father's longing for his lost wife, by his transparent desire that the daughter he named after his wife become ever more of a simulacrum of his lost spouse. By the midpoint of the novel, Abigail's father has had a psychological breakdown as his daughter reaches adolescence, and he must grapple with the potentially incestuous endgame of his ghoulish desire for his dead wife. As the narrator puts it, "This thing with her father . . . was something dead and rotting" (20).

The inspiration for Abigail's crimped family circumstances may in part be autobiographical; Abani has written before of lost and lamented mothers and crippled fathers, notably in his novel *Graceland*. I would suggest, however, that the symbolism of Abigail's family extends beyond such immediate circumstances to offer a metaphor for the state of postcolonial Nigeria. Heterosexual passion and nation formation are a standard elements of colonial and postcolonial literature, as Doris Sommer demonstrates in her study of Latin American romance novels (Sommer 1993). During the anticolonial struggle in Africa, for example, femininity came to be strongly associated with the inner essence of national culture and identity. The absence of this maternal principle in *Becoming Abigail* and the resulting psychological shipwreck of the protagonist's father may consequently be read as offering a metaphor for the conditions of national economic and political collapse that often catalyze human trafficking. This is particularly apparent given the militantly feminist character of Abigail's mother; a judge at thirty-five, she was the founder of the first free women's advocacy group and was known for threatening to chop off the penises of wife beaters (44).

Abigail feels throttled by the ghostly presence of her mother. Abani's narrator in fact intimates that it is the rotten and emotionally if not sexually incestuous nature of Abigail and her father's relationship that leads to her departure for London. Although her father ostensibly packs her off with Uncle Peter to give her "a higher standard of education and living," it's clear that there are far darker forces lurking behind this apparently virtuous act: "She felt his sacrifice knowing that he was fighting in his heart the urge to beg her to stay. But there was also the faintest shadow in his eyes, one that revealed rather than occluded. She shivered and crossed herself, arms and legs locked" (66–67). Her father's suicide shortly before Abigail's departure for London clinches this sense of a metaphorical national family in a state of breakdown, leaving Abigail vulnerable to her uncle's dark designs.

One of the primary ways in which Abigail grapples with the past is through her body. She quite literally traces the absent presence of her mother on her own flesh. What begins as an attempt to inhabit her mother's identity turns into an act of self-mutilation through which she attempts to exorcise her ghost:

This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even. Before she began burning herself she collected anecdotes about her mother and wrote them down in red ink on bits of paper which she stuck on her skin, wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chafing. Becoming. Becoming and chafing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her. But at night, in the shower, the paper would dissolve like a slow lie, the red ink, warm from the hot water, leaking into the drain like bloody tears. That was when she discovered the permanence of fire. (34)

The transition Abani traces in this paragraph is one crucial to the novel. During her early years, Abigail senses her father watching her as she grows into the spitting image of his dead wife, a transformation that Abigail internalizes as she struggles to recover her lost mother. As she grows up, however, Abigail begins to struggle increasingly to forge her own identity. The novel's title is thus a kind of play on words that traces the tense relationship between postcolonial generations. The sense of haunting that emerges in Abani's novel resembles the postcolonial gothic mode developed by other contemporary Nigerian writers such as Helen Oyeyemi to dramatize the traumatized quality of contemporary consciousness (Holden 2009; Novak 2008; Nwakanma 2008). Key to this dynamic in Abani's novel is Abigail's struggle to assert her own agency. Her acts of self-signification with fire offer her a means of marking and mourning her lost mother on her body. Described in this same chapter are Abigail's favorite reading materials: ancient Chinese poems about the evanescence of life, and large maps, which confer a sense of spatial order and control. Like maps, Abigail's willed rituals of remembrance, which horrify her father, are a means of charting the world on the body, an assertion of loss but also of an ordering of self.

This sense of a self written on and through the body figures particularly prominently in Abigail's rebellion after she is placed in sexual servitude in London by her uncle. Peter initially tries to lower her defenses by

buying her expensive presents and makeup. After she physically repels the john he brings into her room at night, however, Peter turns to physical and psychological debasement in order to control Abigail. Dragging her into the yard behind his house, Peter chains her to a doghouse and urinates on her, saying, "This is what we do to dogs" (89). He initiates a routine in which Abigail is rendered completely abject, her identity stripped from her by cold, hunger, and his repeated verbal abuse and acts of sexual violation. Abani's harrowing account of Abigail's torture in these portions of the novel dramatizes the forms of punitive power through which human traffickers tend to control and dominate their captives (Hodge 2007, 170). Sexual slavery in particular relies on forms of physical and psychological control that resemble domestic and child abuse (Bryant-Davis 2009, 70). Victims are intimidated not just into submission but into dependence on their captors. Traffickers tend to ensure that their victims are complicit with illegal movement across borders in various ways and to emphasize their moral compromise by the acts in which they are forced to engage. As a result, victims often feel guilty about their behavior despite the fact that they have clearly been forced into such behavior. In many cases, victims even blame themselves for their situation, making it extremely unlikely that they will seek to escape their captors (Bryant-Davis 2009, 74). In works such as Abani and Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*, this vulnerability is exacerbated dramatically by the victims' status as illegals.

Despite Peter's acts of domination, however, Abigail retains a sense of self, although it is a perilous one. Chained up in Peter's doghouse, she clings to the identity she has carved onto her own skin: "Without hands, she rooted around her skin with her nose. Feeling for the brandings, for the limits of herself. And then the urge came, and she held it away, held it away" (91). Her physical inscriptions remind her of who she is, but also recall to her the passage into another world that both of her parents have made. Abigail is also confronted with her aunt Mary, who has been bludgeoned into total submission and complicity by Peter, to the point where she abandons Abigail to her husband's acts of serial rape. But Abigail rallies, attacking Peter when his acts of abasement threaten to erase the past she has painstakingly written on her skin, the past that makes her who she is:

Fifteen days, passing in the silence of snow.
And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.
Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to
obliterate the tattoos that made her.

Abigail.
 One night.
 Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of
 Abigail.
 And with her teeth tore off Peter's penis. (95–97)

Abigail is involved in two processes of becoming in this passage. On the one hand, she comes to resemble her mother, the bold feminist. In addition, however, Abigail comes into her own as someone who has experienced and withstood forms of abuse that far surpass the relatively mild forms of racism to which her mother was subjected in Britain. Just as in Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*, this self-assertion takes place through direct action against human traffickers. This moment of vengeance transforms Abigail from the abject state of Peter's dog into an avenging Gorgon, running through the streets with the end of his penis held aloft like an Olympic torch (99).

I dwell at such length on the issue of agency and its literary representation not simply because it is central to Abani's novel, but also because of the crucial status of this question in the international legislation designed to combat human trafficking. Trafficking has historically tended to be identified with forced prostitution, but contemporary measures tend to target a greater variety of activities and to reflect concerns about state security. Particularly after the attacks of 9/11, trafficking has been associated with the vulnerability of state borders (Lobasz 2009, 326). Feminist critics have argued, however, that these concerns over security compound rather than solve the problem of trafficking. Repressive border policing makes migration more difficult and more dangerous, increasing migrants' vulnerability to traffickers. In addition, trafficked people who are apprehended and deported are subject to trafficking once again (322). The border security framework also puts the onus onto victims' shoulders to prove their innocence of charges of illegal migration. In order to combat this concern with security and culpability, human rights advocates have insisted on definitions of trafficked persons as victims. Since, for example, exploitation rather than consent is key to the definition of human trafficking in the landmark United Nations' Palermo Protocol of 2000, issues of innocence and guilt are removed from consideration (Zimmerman et al. 2003). The state has a responsibility, according to the protocol, not to criminalize infractions of its borders but rather to aid the victims of trafficking.

Unfortunately, such accounts of human trafficking tend to perpetuate stereotypical notions of gendered helplessness that inherently diminish the legal standing of and popular sympathy for the vast majority of displaced persons, whose relationship to the shadow economy is more ambiguous. Human and sexual trafficking tend to be conflated in much human rights discourse, yet in most countries where data is gathered, women and children are assumed to be the victims of trafficking, while men are seen as labor migrants (Lobasz 2009, 339). This dichotomy implicitly treats women as passive and men as active. Yet trafficked women often do not see themselves as passive. Further, ethnographic work with trafficked women has underlined that they are not always the hoodwinked innocents that human rights advocates sometimes depict. Not only do such well-meaning representations rob women of their agency; they also set up an invidious standard of innocence to which few trafficked people can lay claim. A relatively small percentage of trafficked women are outright kidnapped. If, for example, a trafficked person chooses to willingly engage in sex work rather than being unambiguously subjected to sexual slavery, or if a trafficked person is engaged in nonsex labor, the danger is that he or she will be labeled illegal and criminalized (341). Trafficked persons are forced to prove their innocence, a situation that can hardly be called empowering.

Becoming Abigail initially appears to be playing on precisely such sensationalist media stereotypes concerning kidnapping through its narrative of Abigail's captivity and abjection at the hands of Peter. Yet as the narrative unfolds, Abani challenges facile readings of his protagonist as an uncomplicated victim. This is particularly apparent in the otherwise perplexing narrative that dominates the second half of the novel. In this section of *Becoming Abigail*, Abani relates his protagonist's love affair with Derek, the British social worker who is assigned to care for her after she escapes from Peter. Derek refuses to institutionalize Abigail, as many of his colleagues suggest he do, instead offering quiet care and concern that make her feel that she is being seen for herself for perhaps the first time in her life (54). This healing bond gradually grows into one of mutual desire. Abigail proves remarkably resilient given what she's been through with her father and Peter, but Abani's narrative clearly constructs her as a woman thirsty for the sense of identity conferred by an egalitarian relationship: "Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken. And she wept for her joy. . . . Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking" (52). To underline this

sense of coming into self, Abigail leaves Derek following their encounter and retreats to his kitchen, where she heats a needle on the stove and burns dots into her flesh to signify her coming into self. This scarification is, the narrator suggests, a “map of her, the skin of her world” (53).

But where Abigail sees an awakening of identity and self-assertion, the state sees only victimization. When his wife discovers his relationship with Abigail, Derek is arrested. Abigail is taken back into state custody. She is constructed by the state as a helpless victim, and her protests make little impact: “They said they were doing this to protect her. That she didn’t know what choice was. But she did. She who had been taken and taken and taken. And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had choice in the matter, it was taken away. Maybe, she thought, maybe some of us are just here to feed others” (117). Are we as readers to believe the narrator’s characterization of this traumatized young woman’s motivations? Is Abigail in fact capable of making a conscious choice given what she’s been through? Her acts of scarification certainly qualify any facile celebration of her agency. Nonetheless, Abani’s narrative also clearly sets out a critique of a simplistic feminist reading of Abigail as a passive victim of a powerful male figure. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Abani describes his protagonist’s reaction to a social worker’s words during Derek’s trial: “Thin-lipped and angry, the woman bumped into her, and looking from Abigail to Derek and back, and mistaking the anguished look on Abigail’s face, said to her: Don’t you worry, sister, that monster is going away for a long time. And then the anguished look on the social worker’s face as Abigail’s not inconsiderable right hook connected with her nose” (118).

Abani’s Abigail is definitely hard to pigeonhole given her acts of self-mutilation and her ultimate suicide in an attempt to save Derek from prison. Her—and Abani’s—resistance to a condescending feminism is, however, clear. Trafficked people may be hyperexploited, *Becoming Abigail* suggests, but they do not see themselves as helpless and without agency. Abani’s novel asks us to consider the interrelations of different spatial scales of representation (in both senses of the term), from the somatic and familial to the juridical order of the nation-state to emerging transnational human rights regimes. As cultural geographers such as Neil Smith have reminded us, these spatial scales exist not in isolation from one another but rather in a kind of nested hierarchy (1992, 66). Power, Smith argues, is exerted through acts of border policing on each of these scales. Today, as many of the redistributive functions of the state are suppressed, leaving

an incessantly augmented policing function, what is the impact on other spatial scales of this transformation in state power? Under what conditions, *Becoming Abigail* asks its readers to consider, are forms of agency and belonging foreclosed, and what forms of literary and juridical representation might challenge such acts of foreclosure?

Conclusion

Immigration has traditionally opened up fresh vistas for self-fashioning and processes of becoming. As Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Wasted Lives*, however, our planet is now represented as full (2004, 5). There are no longer any blank spaces on the world map, ripe for exploration and settlement, as there were in the era of European imperialism. As long as modernity remained a geographically circumscribed privilege, the resulting power differential ensured that populations constituted as surplus by the economic and political processes of modernization could emigrate to a portion of the planet that was not yet modern. But modernity has gone global. As Bauman puts it: “As the triumphant progress of modernization has reached the furthest lands of the planet and practically the totality of human production and consumption has become money and market mediated, . . . global solutions to local problems, or global outlets for local excesses, are no longer available. Just the contrary is the case: all localities have to bear the consequences of modernity’s global triumph” (6). The upshot is increasing production of “human waste,” people for whom the prevailing order has no place in either economic or symbolic terms and who cannot light out for the territories. For Bauman, the result is an increasing obsession among elites with security as the numbers of precarious and politically volatile masses grow.

What I have been calling cargo culture exists at the outer limit of these trends toward the creation of “human waste” and insecurity. People who are constituted as “illegal” by existing punitive migration policies also tend to be rendered invisible by dominant symbolic frameworks of belonging and citizenship within affluent nation-states. As I have demonstrated, literature has also been constitutionally averse to representing people and communities who are constructed as alien. Although it was born during an era of enclosure and has repeatedly been mobilized by writers sympathetic to subaltern communities, the novel has tended to be anchored in stable national communities. There have, of course, always been exceptions to

this rule, but not enough, I would suggest, to generate a substantial literary corpus. During the age of neoliberal globalization, however, writers such as Chris Abani, Caryl Phillips, and Monica Ali have begun to represent the experiences of migrants whose travels cast them outside the framework of national belonging and citizenship. Such literary representations dramatize the struggles of such unhoused individuals to assert a sense of identity and agency under the most inimical of conditions.

Becoming Abigail concentrates its readers' attention on the ways in which various institutions, including, most prominently, the family and the state, inscribe its protagonist's body. Abigail struggles to remember her absent mother by writing her loss into her own flesh, yet this assertion of presence ironically only diminishes her own sense of identity and agency. In a reflection on the collapse of the postcolonial state in Africa, Abani suggests that there is little space for belonging within this national family. Yet Abani's novel offers no easy alternatives to this postcolonial condition. The dysfunctional condition into which Abigail is inscribed is a necessary prelude to her subjection to human trafficking and the forms of displacement and abjection visited on her by her uncle. *Becoming Abigail* insists, however, on the forms of resistance that these structural conditions of oppression catalyze. Abigail's self-inscription ultimately catalyzes her rebellion against the sexual abuse to which her uncle subjects her. Similarly, she refuses to accept the state's definition of her as a helpless victim of sexual abuse. If this is the only form of citizenship that the nation and the international regime of human rights offers, it is one with which Abigail will have no truck. Abani's novel refuses to provide us with a saccharine ending, perhaps in order to forestall facile liberal humanist notions of the individual triumph over adversity. Nonetheless, Abigail's defiant self-inscription offers an articulate challenge to the forms of erasure to which the denizens of cargo culture are all too often subjected.

What relevance do such extreme experiences of unbelonging have for those who enjoy the perquisites of citizenship, impoverished though they may be by neoliberal globalization? As I have argued, illegal immigrants are not simply surplus to contemporary society. Rather, they are subjected to harsh new forms of labor discipline that place them in the forefront of the neoliberal project of privatizing and dismantling the public sphere. Their fate is a harbinger of what is to come for the rest of society, and therefore their traumatic experiences and fleeting acts of resistance are of pivotal significance for society in general. As David Bacon puts it in his

discussion of the politics of immigration, “Displacement and inequality are just as much part of today’s economic system as they were at its birth in the slave trade and the enclosure acts” (2008, 69). Such circumstances, which I have described as cargo culture, are not simply a moral affront, but are a lever used to dismantle the forms of social security won over the past century in both the global North and South. If we are to stem a race toward such extreme circumstances for society in general, we need to transform current definitions of belonging and, ultimately, to reframe our ideas of citizenship in ways that sever the knot that ties legal identity to the nation-state.

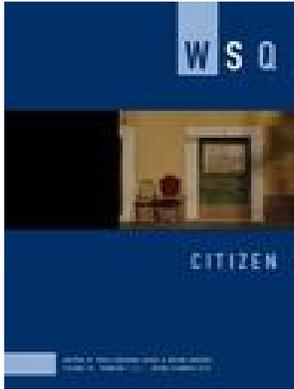
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