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Recovering the Uneventful: Trauma and Survival in Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*

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**RECOVERING THE UNEVENTFUL: TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL IN SADE
ADENIRAN'S *IMAGINE THIS***

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Sade Adeniran's novel *Imagine This* and its portrayal of the protagonist's pain and the efforts she makes to recapture the stable life that preceded her traumatic suffering by telling her story in the form of diary entries. It follows theoretical models of trauma as explicated by Cathy Caruth and in particular, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's idea that the subject's testimony as a necessary catalyst to healing. The article argues that rather than a linear movement from trauma, through testimony, to healing, *Imagine This* re-conceptualizes traumatic experience and healing as a complex journey that is shaped by multiple trauma events rather than a single one. Thus, the subject's testimony is constantly interrupted successive sufferings, thereby postponing closure and healing. This relation between the subject and pain implies the individual produces many testimonies rather than one, a crucial strategy for re-imagining the self and to begin the complex journey towards healing.

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Introduction

In their introduction to *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, Das and Kleinman state that “in the midst of the worst horrors, people continue to live, to survive, and to cope” (1). Sade Adeniran’s debut novel, *Imagine This*, seems to be modeled on this idea of a struggle to survive a horrifying event. Adeniran’s novel has been well received in Nigeria and the evidence lies in its integration into school curricula across tertiary institutions. Apart from deploying a child-narrator, which has become characteristic of twenty-first century Nigerian writers, Adeniran’s novel is no doubt an important text, not only because it chronicles traumatic experiences of a young girl, but also because it rewrites the idea of recovery as an automatic effect of trauma. A glance at *Imagine This* confirms that the protagonist’s experience is characterized by post-traumatic stress disorder arising from the originary event, which is forced relocation to Nigeria. This initial event definitely plays a monumental role in the protagonist’s suffering, but the text indicates that it cannot account adequately for the totality of her pain.

A close scrutiny of the text shows that, in addition to the trauma of relocation, the protagonist suffers other tragedies that re-traumatize her, such as the loss of her brother, her father’s death, and an automobile accident. These alternating traumatic moments undermine her efforts at recovering her ordinary and uneventful life prior to relocating to Nigeria. They re-traumatize the protagonist by cutting open new psychological wounds (Caruth 4), causing the survivor to witness multiple traumatic events, the implication of which is the inevitable layering of her narratives. Precisely because the story is structured as diary entries, it mimics the form of private testimonies in which the main event is always interrupted by new trauma events. Through this formal structure of the story, *Imagine This* reconstitutes trauma discourse by demonstrating that trauma is not always confined to a singular primal moment.

As in the case of Lola Ogunwole of *Imagine This*, a survivor sometimes experiences multiple tragedies, which is why an account of these sufferings should be regarded not as *testimony* but as *testimonies*, which occur as what I describe as *traumatic eruptions*, an invasion of the main narrative by new tragic stories. The novel testifies that trauma also inheres in other tragic happenings that constantly interrupt the subject’s testimony, thereby postponing closure and the recovery of the uneventful. Through this deployment of *traumatic eruptions*, *Imagine This* offers a new way of thinking about survivors precisely because the novel helps to unlearn the idea of a monothematic testimony. Transcending monothematic testimony, however, does not invalidate it; *traumatic eruptions* only suggest that recovery is sometimes delayed, not necessarily by the magnitude of the primal event but mainly because the survivor continues to suffer more tragic events. Traumatic eruptions can help enrich the knowledge about recovery because it is premised on multiple, rather than singular events.

One way to begin the process of understanding survivors' need to reclaim their old life is what Das and Kleinman have described as survivors' attempt to restore their normal life by reclaiming what they have termed "the uneventful" (1-2). "Uneventful" may suggest banality, but within the context of Das and Kleinman's argument it signifies tranquility and peace in contrast to the chaos brought by the traumatic event (1-2). This "uneventful" may have been lost in time and space, but its application here is not an attempt to time-travel to the past. Rather, the "uneventful" constitutes the time and space within which survivors can reclaim their subjectivities and experience relative autonomy and freedom from their psychic pain. *Imagine This* helps to appreciate the critical gulf between ordinary trauma event and subsequent sufferings that interrupt the victim's major testimony, and the quest for recovery, which is contingent upon rendering the account of one's pain.

It is for this reason that Lola Ogunwole's story is crucial to the operation of trauma on the one hand and the victim's survival on the other. As Felman and Laub have argued in their study of testimonies, people survive not just to tell their stories but also to tell their stories in order to survive (78). *Imagine This* evinces this claim, especially because its form of a diary shows that living in a hostile environment isolates the protagonist but succeeds in addressing her story to an imaginary audience, the diary named Jupiter. Within the context of the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi, Norridge also stresses the importance of enabling the voices of survivors because it is crucial to their healing (5). Therefore, the story in *Imagine This* charts a new path in Nigerian fiction, contributing to an emerging discourse of trauma in Nigerian women's fiction.

Adeniran's novel lends credence to the emergence of narratives about private suffering and occupies a central place in Nigerian women's fiction, which includes Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Azuah's *Sky-High Flames*, and Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*. This list is by no means exhaustive but the texts deviate substantially from the dominant fiction of "national allegory" exploring profoundly personal crises. More importantly, *Imagine This* enacts the ways in which the individual female subject's mind experiences pain and how it deals with this pain.

This focus on personal experience of pain is thematized in *Imagine This* in at least four specific dimensions: struggle for personal identity, sex and sexuality, traumatic pain, and lastly, subjectivity. These dimensions of *Imagine This* and its contemporaries demonstrate that trauma is no longer the preserve of fictional works that address catastrophic events such as war (Akingbe 49; Nwahunanya vi). The implication of this long-awaited detour is that marginal stories have now become centralized. Another important example is Woods *African Pasts: Memory and History in African Literatures*, which explores trauma attributable to African colonial past (6). There is, therefore, a reversal of diminution of individual women's pain, which had not enjoyed thematic

prominence in the master-narratives of African literatures in general and Nigerian literature in particular.

Since trauma is the result of breaching the survivor's psychic defenses, these novels are devoted to subject formation, disintegration, and re-constitution. Regardless of the now widespread postmodernist's declaration of the dissolution of the subject (Belsey 54-5; Jameson 17-8), traumatic suffering and recovery are necessarily contingent upon the idea of a relatively stable subject, which is why most of these writers (except Helen Oyeyemi) have embraced realism (Bryce 49-50). While the "death of the subject" has historical and epistemological significance in Western critical thought, and though this significance certainly applies to various postcolonial cultural situations, it can pose a problem for postcolonial subjects whose survival consists in reclaiming their space, voice, body, and, most importantly, subjectivity. Buttressing this point, Shohat and Stam argue that "Speaking for oneself ... is not a simple act but a complex process, especially since women, minoritarian, and Third World peoples speak today in a theoretical context where the notion of a coherent subject identity, let alone a community identity, seems epistemologically suspect" (345). Spivak also elaborates on the ironic dimension of the dissolution of the subject in her influential article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she states that "The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject [...] actually inaugurates the Subject" (272). These views help readers to appreciate the fact that these writers self-consciously re-inscribe subjectivity in their texts, providing the contexts in which to voice personal experiences of pain. Their choice of the subjective narrator, within a theoretical climate in which the death of the subject has been pronounced, is nothing short of a defiance that is not simply an aesthetic choice but also a political one.

While the death of the subject may have been over-determined by historical, aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural factors within Western intellectual institutions, Shohat and Stam's contribution to the debate exposes the declaration's ideological interest. Apparently, Adeniran, and her peers have self-consciously resuscitated the subject to create characters who refuse to be silenced but who choose to be willing witnesses to their private trauma so that their voices correspond to their trauma. They seem to have heeded Dominick LaCapra's caveat to survivors, writers, witnesses, and historians to articulate their subjective proximity to traumatic violence in order to avoid supplanting the voice of the survivor (*Writing History* 188; "Representing the Holocaust" 110). Therefore, repossessing the subject occupies a central space precisely because the validity of the testimony is in proportion to the witness's contiguity to trauma events, regardless of how elliptical it might be. Readers are therefore lured and coerced into becoming secondary witnesses to the trauma of the protagonists. Of particular importance is Adeniran's adoption of the subjective narrative mode rather than the conventional omniscient style.

The diary form of *Imagine This* inserts the reader into Lola's private world, a world marked by solitude in which the only companion, listener, and secondary witness is the diary named "Jupiter." By deploying this style, Adeniran's text reinforces the protagonist's centre of self not only because the journal is a record of personal events, but also because the events constitute Lola's testimony shared only with Jupiter, in an attempt to reclaim her life. Here, there are no mediating voices unlike most of the novels of earlier generations such as Nwapa's and Emecheta's, in which the omniscient narrator's voice obscures direct access to the protagonists' stories. For example, commenting on Nwapa's *Efuru*, Kowino observes that "the narrator tells us that Efuru was troubled by 'the fact that she was considered barren'" (31; Emphasis mine). The word, "troubled," though describes Efuru's predicament of childlessness, the mediating voice of the omniscient narrator ironically silences Efuru's voice at that moment in which Efuru's voice could have expressed the extent to which she "was troubled."

Trauma

Reference to trauma in this article follows mainly Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Caruth argues that in English, German, and Greek, the word "trauma" is used to refer to "an injury inflicted on a body" (3). She asserts that in medical, psychiatric and Freudian writings "the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). Contrasting the wound on the body and the one on the mind, Caruth claims that unlike the wound on the body, the wound on the mind resists quick healing because it is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). This explanation implies trauma inheres not in the cataclysmic event but "in the way that its very unassimilated nature ... returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). The survivor is haunted mainly because the event has caused a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world (4). As a result of this breach, the subjects constantly experience fear that threatens their life with almost the same intensity as the primal event. Caruth explains that this fright results not from the threat to life but from being unprepared for the encounter. She elaborates,

The breach of the mind — the consciousness of the threat of life — is not caused by the quantity of stimulus (...) but by 'fright,' the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly (...) the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of the experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known (62).

Trauma arises then, not necessarily from the violence of an event but from the epistemological lacuna that the survivor could not bridge, the very incomprehensibility of the victim's survival (6).

She says further that what is at stake is the tension between near-death experience and the non-intelligibility of survival, which is why she argues that “trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*. What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival” (64). The memory of the violent event returns in a nightmare or flashback precisely because “it is not fully assimilated as it occurs” and “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (5).

The survivor’s experience of a nightmare or flashback of the originary event, Caruth argues, is the place where trauma resides and can retraumatize the survivor (63). She notes that being retraumatized leads to high rates of suicide, as found among survivors of Vietnam or of concentration camps, who eventually commit suicide after they have clearly survived (63). To buttress this assertion, Caruth states that the “trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream, but in *the experience of waking from it*” (64: original emphasis). Because they sometimes retraumatize survivors, flashbacks and nightmares tend to destabilize their daily lives, which they probably had taken for granted prior to the event. As can be observed from Caruth’s elaboration of trauma, the victim relives a violent event in the past which returns repeatedly to haunt him or her. While Caruth’s theory assumes a singular event, it also helps to appreciate the fact that Lola has to undergo this process with each of the tragic events that befall her.

Although Caruth’s theory of trauma is revolutionary in the sense that the survivor’s repetitive acts are attempts to unravel the mystery of survival rather than to discover the encounter with death (65), *Imagine This* is equally revolutionary in its own right by experimenting with multiple events, which, according to Derrida, temporalize the testimony’s closure (136). Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* thus makes possible the contextualization of *Imagine This* within the framework of a singular event and testimony. While Caruth’s text is fundamental to the reading of this text, the fact that it does not account for what is here called *traumatic eruptions* implies that Adeniran’s novel would not fit neatly into her theory. Meanwhile, *traumatic eruptions* would suggest a situation in which the victim is constantly exposed to new stimuli that interrupt the main testimony. This *traumatic eruption* is deployed in the analysis of *Imagine This* in order to show that the survivor’s quest to reclaim her subjectivity, own her story, and recover the uneventful is contingent upon witnessing to the layers of tragic events.

The rest of this essay will be divided into two parts. The first section, entitled “The Event,” engages the spatial displacement from London to Nigeria as the originary event that structures Lola’s testimony, while the second section demonstrates the challenges encountered by survivors when they are exposed to several traumatic moments and stresses how these moments constitute *traumatic eruptions* that interrupt the original testimony. Although Lola eventually

recontextualizes her trauma and slowly approaches recovery, the impact of *traumatic eruptions* in her testimony ultimately defers closure, and also postpones the recovery of the uneventful.

The Event

Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* tells the story of Lola Ogunwole and her brother, Adebola, who are forcibly moved from London to Nigeria after their father realized that he might lose the children to child protection services. No sooner had they arrived in Lagos than they were moved to Idogun in Ondo state, and it is at this location that the first journal entry on 20th May 1977 is made. What follows is a series of lamentation about lacking basic material needs and parental and fraternal bonds which explain her obsessive wish to return to London. Lola's grief is exacerbated by their father's absence from their lives, despite his occasional visits, which Lola believes, are no substitute for a reunited family. In addition to frustration with Idogun, hostility of family members, and disenchantment with schooling, Lola's brother (Adebola) dies. She attributes his death to their uncle's (Uncle Joseph) abuse. The impact of Adebola's death on Lola is so intense that she mourns him on his grave; and when she begins to hallucinate, she is moved to Lagos to join her father. Unfortunately, she is expelled after assaulting her step sister who bullies her. From this point, she is tossed from one relative to the other (Uncle Jacob and Uncle Niyi) until she reunites with her father later in the novel. After surviving a car accident, she struggles to develop a relationship with her father. And just when this relationship begins to blossom, the father is assassinated, after which she decides to relocate to London.

Expectedly, *Imagine This* was received with critical acclaim that emphasized the novel's engagement with burning social issues that affect young girls in an African setting such as Nigeria. For example, Edith Awogu-Maduagwu highlights the predatory environment that makes young girls vulnerable to sexual assault (197). Also, Nard Choi argues that the socially restrictive village setting is paradoxical in that it limits and at the same time empowers young girls when they transgress sacred spaces (4). Yunusy Castory Ng'umbi emphasizes the tension and changing perceptions of the family unit, especially because Lola's disappointments come from family members (155). Sunday Joseph Ayodabo argues that the experience of displacement creates an opportunity to embrace and contest national identities (549). He also observes that Adeniran and her contemporaries inherit the trauma of earlier generations, particularly, that of the Nigerian Civil War (550). As for Okuyade, one major feature that delineates these recent writers' work from those of earlier generations is that they are *bildungsroman* because they dwell on the protagonists' growth from childhood ignorance to knowledge, and from childhood to adulthood ("Weaving Memories of Childhood" 145-146; "Trying to Survive" 27). These views cover a wide spectrum of critical opinions of Adeniran's novel, but an aspect that seems to demand more scrutiny is the protagonist's personal experience of trauma and her journey towards healing.

Consequently, Lola immediately introduces the reader to the magnitude of her pain by juxtaposing her double displacement (from London to Lagos and from Lagos to Idogun) with the Middle Passage (*Imagine This* 3-7). This juxtaposition is crucial to her story in that the direction of the trans-Atlantic voyage becomes reversed. Through this reversal, the novel destabilizes the racial-geographical fallacy about home by situating home in London and compels the reader to question the notion of home as fixed and timeless. When Lola says, “I suppose I have to get used to calling this place ‘home’” (*Imagine This* 6), the novel draws attention to her lack of agency to choose her home and to choose her journeys. The parallel between her displacement and the Middle Passage might have been slightly exaggerated, but her suffering while feeling stranded in Nigeria parallels slaves’ lack of autonomy. It is for this reason that displacement and imposition of a different spatial identity constitute the traumatic event in *Imagine This*.

The story of this event is not only a record of the violent transportation to Nigeria, but also a testimony to the wound of the mind that it produces in Lola, which causes her to become fixated with a different time and place. Following Caruth, it can be argued that the suddenness and intensity of the pain rob Lola of any meaning of the displacement (4), and because she is unable to integrate the new home into her reality, she is always drawn back to the primal scene of spatial displacement. Since Lola is unable to comprehend this “Middle Passage,” she constantly returns to it in a process termed “the return of the repressed,” which implies reliving that originary moment of pain. This explains why Lola’s memory of London repetitively invades her life in Idogun.

This invasion of the present by the past fits well into the proper functioning of trauma. For example, after she moves to Lagos, Lola reflects on her life in this city and says, “Once upon a time I held that dream, to go back and live in London with my friends. But I’m no longer a child and those friends I once had have also grown up and moved on. May be one day I will go back, but for now with all its faults, my life is in Nigeria” (*Imagine This* 223). On the surface, the protagonist is coming to terms with being in Nigeria. However, despite accepting Nigeria provisionally, the desire to return to London persists and comes up at least forty-three times in the novel. The implication is that the displacement remains an event that she just “cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth 2).

Therefore, the persistence of this event that she cannot leave behind and the simultaneous desire to repossess her normal life are consistent with the normal mechanism of trauma. For instance, even though she is physically present in Nigeria, Lola is psychically rooted in another time and place, precisely because for most victims of trauma, time ceases and the past becomes integrated into the present and vice versa. In his study of the relationship between space and race in visual culture, Burgin recognizes the significance of time in trauma and argues: “[t]here is no ‘past reality’ in the *psychical reality* that is the object of psychoanalysis ... the past event, whether actual or fictional, produces real effects in the present” (118). Kennedy also insists that “traumatic

memory is atemporal” (104). Consequently, once trauma has taken place, the victim experiences temporal neutrality or what can be tentatively termed, *ontological anachronism*, in which the past’s gravitational superiority consumes the present, just in the same way that Lola’s past consistently dominates and disrupts the present. Therefore, the obsessive wish to return to London, the frequent wish to have a protective mother, and the repetitive longing for a united family, all point to that primal moment of violent separation. However, despite these repetitive actions, *Imagine This* refuses to acquiesce to the seemingly totalizing force of trauma by thematizing Lola’s determination to survive. She says early in the novel, “Dearest Jupiter... May be one day I’ll look back with fond memories but right now I have to live each second as it comes and hope I survive” (*Imagine This* 48-9). Surviving the traumatic event, therefore, is not an automatic act because, as the quotation suggests, survival requires willpower and hope. Lola’s survival depends on “evolving new inner forms that include the traumatic event” (152), in order to avoid getting trapped in traumatic neurosis. However, Lola’s efforts to evolve into a new self are sabotaged by other traumatic events that erupt into her testimony.

Traumatic Eruptions

Lola’s narrative has been dominated by the pain of displacement, but this gives way to *traumatic eruptions* the moment Adebola dies. Although she is aware that Adebola has been sick, nothing prepared her for the news of his death. Certainly, Lola is devastated by the news; however, beyond the emotional impact of Adebola’s death on her is the effect on the story of *Imagine This*. The implication for Lola’s testimony is a radical shift to a new event, which must have also created a new wound in the mind that has to be processed. The eruption of a new suffering ineluctably disrupts and postpones the closure to the main testimony. Lola expresses the agony of losing her brother: “What have I done wrong that I lose the most important people in my life? First my mother, now my brother. Where is Daddy? Why isn’t he here? I’m all alone. Adebola is dead” (*Imagine This* 85). This intensity of her sorrow later culminates in her inability to speak (*Imagine This* 85-6), an inter-textual connection to Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* in which, having witnessed her sister Rosa’s horrifying autopsy, Clara is unable to speak for nine years (37-39). Just like in *The House of the Spirits*, *Imagine This* demonstrates that the sheer pain of loss sometimes haunts the survivor to the extent that it resists vocalization.

This loss of speech functions beyond inter-textual appropriation in *Imagine This*. Lola’s silence becomes so central to the suffering that it coincides with the time in which she is probably diagnosed with trauma. In her rendering of the doctor’s prognosis, she tells Jupiter, that the doctor “told Father that I was suffering from a word beginning with ‘T’ (I don’t know how to spell it) and that with time I’ll talk again” (*Imagine This* 90). Adebola’s death appears to have more devastating consequences on her [Lola] precisely because it suggests that she would become probably more isolated, which plausibly explains why her psychological and emotional turmoil becomes

unspeakable. Consequently, Adebola's death supplants the extant narrative, which, though not forgotten, has to be integrated into the new event.

Rather than signifying the absence of pain, silence is in itself a narrative of pain that resists verbalization. In her examination of women's testimonies in the public hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ross argues that "silence too is a legitimate discourse on pain—if it is acknowledged. The recognition of pain may be heavily reliant on acknowledgment of the meaning of silence, and of the validity of silence as a means of communicating particular kinds of experience" (272). Similarly, in *Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Scarry contends that the fundamental character of pain is its "unsharability," which is enforced through pain's resistance to language (4). However, *Imagine This* recognizes the fact that trauma often silences the survivor and therefore empowers her protagonist to undermine that "unsharability" of pain by creating an audience in Jupiter. While Lola's traumatic experience is shielded from most of the other characters (except perhaps Uncle Niyi and Alhaja), it is nevertheless available to readers through Jupiter. This formal choice in the novel is not without its purpose: it emphasizes the fact that, except through a privileged access to a survivor, most survivors suffer in silence. It also shows that healing sometimes follows a complex itinerary rather than a linear one.

Adebola's death forces a cyclic return to the start of a new testimony. The implication is the compounding of the psychological burden of mending the breach in the mind's defenses through the survivor's story. The importance of these testimonies cannot be over-emphasized because they are necessary, and, in fact, contingent on healing. Regarding healing, Felman and Laub contend that "there is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (78). Although there is no indication that Felman and Laub had focused their theory on multiple events, *Imagine This* provides a perspective of trauma repeated exposure to stimuli, forcing the victim to originary moments of events. That is, the victim is intent on having access to the knowledge that he or she missed at the primal scene, except that in the case of *Imagine This*, Lola breaks the linear trajectory of her narrative primarily because she constantly returns to primal moments.

The possibility of closure and survival becomes enhanced when Lola moves to Lagos with her father and his new family but unfortunately, this hope is short-lived when Lola attacks Ronke (her step sister) with a bottle for bullying her. Lola describes the incident as follows: "I didn't mean to hurt her, I just lost my temper and threw the bottle at her when she started making fun of me and Adebola. She said I was mad and probably took after my mum because only a crazy woman would leave her children and disappear" (*Imagine This* 96). Ronke's insensitivity triggers the memory of the absence of Lola's mother, which explains the violence with which she reacts. She

is, therefore, banished from her father's home and is forced to depend for her accommodation on the charity of relatives. This peregrination intensifies Lola's isolation, causing her to lament: "I'm a football, kicked from player to player (...) I'm an unwanted parcel" (*Imagine This* 99). Precisely because she finds "Adebola's companionship" during her hallucinations comforting, going to Lagos becomes another violent separation that brings back the memory of the initial displacement. In Lagos, she lives with Uncle Jacob and then Uncle Niyi, who eventually convinces the father to take her back. While waiting for her dad to give her access to his residence, Lola becomes physically and mentally exhausted and is hit by a car, but surprisingly, she is nursed by a family that treats her like one of their own. The significance of these events is that they lead to an accretion of pain, all of which compel their own testimony, undermining the possibility of a linear testimony. In each of the spaces she occupies—Idogun with her grandmother, her father's place in Lagos, Uncle Jacob's house in Surulere, and Uncle Niyi's apartment—Lola exists not only in strange, but also in *indifferent*, spaces. According to Burgin, "It is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space, but also as an object for others in space, that gives the subject any coherent identity" (129). Therefore, Lola's presence in these spaces constitutes intrusion and disruption, which is why the spaces constitute what Burgin calls "paranoiac space," from which she is inevitably alienated (117). But these spaces also serve another purpose, which is to help her to navigate her pain and indirectly work to reformulate her subjectivity. More importantly, each of these spaces signifies one traumatic event or the other, each shaping the protagonist's self. The most ostensibly benign of these spaces—Uncle Niyi's house—partakes of the discourse of trauma, through Uncle Niyi's nocturnal invasion of another's space: Lola's body (129). This particular episode helps Lola to discover women's vulnerability in a world in which unregulated men's sexual energy exposes women to molestation and assault. However, her entry into her father's space puts an end to this molestation, although she still has to confront different challenges.

After Lola's father is assassinated, his house becomes indifferent to her, an indifference grounded in the family's occupation and appropriation of property without acknowledging her rights to her father's estate. Ironically, the only space in which she is not "Other" is Alhaja's, in which her integration into the family does not require biological preconditions. This gesture destabilizes the family as a timeless space of refuge, which explains why *Imagine This* concerns itself with "the ways in which young female characters empower themselves through the rethinking of family relationships" (Nadaswaran 20). Despite the adversities she faced, Lola's story indicates that she possesses the doggedness to survive the tragedies she encounters in different spaces. Examples abound in the novel; these include resorting to stealing to escape starvation at Idogun; determination to get a university education; coming to terms with Adebola's death; and surviving eviction after eviction. Despite her vulnerability, starvation, and pain, she fights off a potential rapist (Wale):

"Please Wale, open this door, I want to go home," I begged.

“What! I beg jare, commot your cloth. You girls say no meaning yes, you want a guy to chase you.”

“Wale, I don’t want to have sex with you. I just want to go home.”

“Eh me, I want to have sex with you.”

I flinched. . . .

“I will scream and they will hear me in Timbuktu if you don’t open this door now.”

I was prepared to die and all I felt was a calm acceptance of my fate. I knew there was going to be no savior and if I couldn’t save myself, I was going to make sure he suffered with me. . . . I had nothing to lose and no reason to stay alive. So I took his brother’s baseball stick and started swinging in everything and anything. . . . I started with the TV, then the glass cabinet with all the fancy plates and I just kept on smashing and screaming like a mad woman, “You will not touch me,” over and over. In the end Wale was the one begging me to go. (133-134)

The sheer resolve to confront the situation headlong saves Lola from Wale’s violent intention, but what is quite crucial here is that Lola refuses to succumb to the impending attack. Being able to resist Wale by screaming and destroying the living room, Lola demonstrates her determination to prevent another traumatic event. As evidence of her development through these crises, Lola expresses her understanding of the challenges of survival when, towards the end of the novel, she says, “I know I must keep putting one foot in front of the other, because the tree that cannot shed its leaves in the dry season, cannot survive the period of drought” (*Imagine This* 212). One major manifestation of this idea of self-preservation and self-renewal is her resolve to forgo her boyfriend, Segun, after many disappointments.

Perhaps Lola’s ability to survive manifests ultimately in her readiness to rewrite her story and in her determination to subordinate her traumatic pasts and create a new life for herself. After realizing that her boyfriend (Segun) has been cheating on her all along, she asserts: “I’ll survive. I’ve survived worse” (*Imagine This* 248). But more crucial is her decision to have her first sexual encounter with the same cheating boyfriend. The reader may find the decision counter-intuitive, but Lola argues as follows:

I didn’t do it to try to keep him. I wanted my first time to be special and memorable. Memorable it certainly will be, the moment forever seared into my brain with a hot iron rod. I wanted him to be my first.

Why did I give in? Because I know he’d never truly be mine again and I needed something special to remember and cling to. Instead of thinking of him with Bridget or anyone else, I’d always have the night we spent together (*Imagine This* 249-50).

Judging from this passage, Lola’s story has emerged with power by creating a counter-narrative that displaces the *traumatic eruptions*. Not only that, despite the fact that she has admitted that she

lives in the past and lives for the past, it is clear that she now understands the importance of letting the turbulent past go and forming a new future for herself and by herself; a future shaped by positive memories. In addition, especially in conventional terms, she moves from innocence to experience, a movement that evinces her readiness for adult life. These new memories are captured when, rather than close her diary with “The End,” she does with “The Beginning,” which does not imply the disappearance of the trauma memories but a transgression of them in a way that their terror becomes significantly attenuated to facilitate the recovery of the uneventful (Santner 152).

Conclusion

Sade Adeniran’s *Imagine This* shows that the protagonist’s mission to regain her uneventful life, after the shock of displacement, loss of loved ones, and being involved in an accident, is a complex process precisely because of traumatic eruptions that retraumatize the main character. In addition, if Lola reconstructs her uneventful life strictly as the pre-traumatic existence, it takes the form of an imaginary that promises psychic safety but paradoxically, signifies the impossibility recovering this time and space. Therefore on the one hand, Lola’s decision to go back to London suggests a “return to the Freudian womb,” which implies a fantasy mainly because the London at the end of the novel is estranged from the London prior to traumatic intrusion. Despite her determination to return to London, she understands that it is a strange home but one that makes a new life possible. More important, the novel attests to Lola’s own development to an adult who is ready to survive with little or no support from anyone.

Having survived different indifferent spaces occupied and defended by other women: Mama in Idogun, “Cook woman” (her step mother in Lagos), Iya Foluso at Surulere, and Iya Soji at Festac, Lola begins to write a new story of perseverance and hope. Moreover, by refusing the motherly support that she had always craved at the height of her suffering, Lola challenges the idealized image of the mother, which evinces her evolution from childhood to adulthood and ultimately, recreates herself as a subject. Despite this personal independence from family members, the novel does not disavow the significance of support. It simply privileges support from non-biological relatives, since the text has demystified the received perception of the family as the site of bonding and support. The novel is just asking readers to expand their understanding of family beyond the limits of blood. Although *traumatic eruptions* disturb, prolong and defer Lola’s healing, *Imagine This* shows that they have ironically empowered her to produce an alternative narrative that re-imagines her “self” beyond biological bonds. Such a projection of the protagonist may have over-celebrated individual agency, the fact remains that the novel attempts to reconstruct the female subject outside the discourse of female dependency. This way, *Imagine This* is justified in celebrating the subject’s ability to rewrite the past, but more importantly her power to re-imagine the future.

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