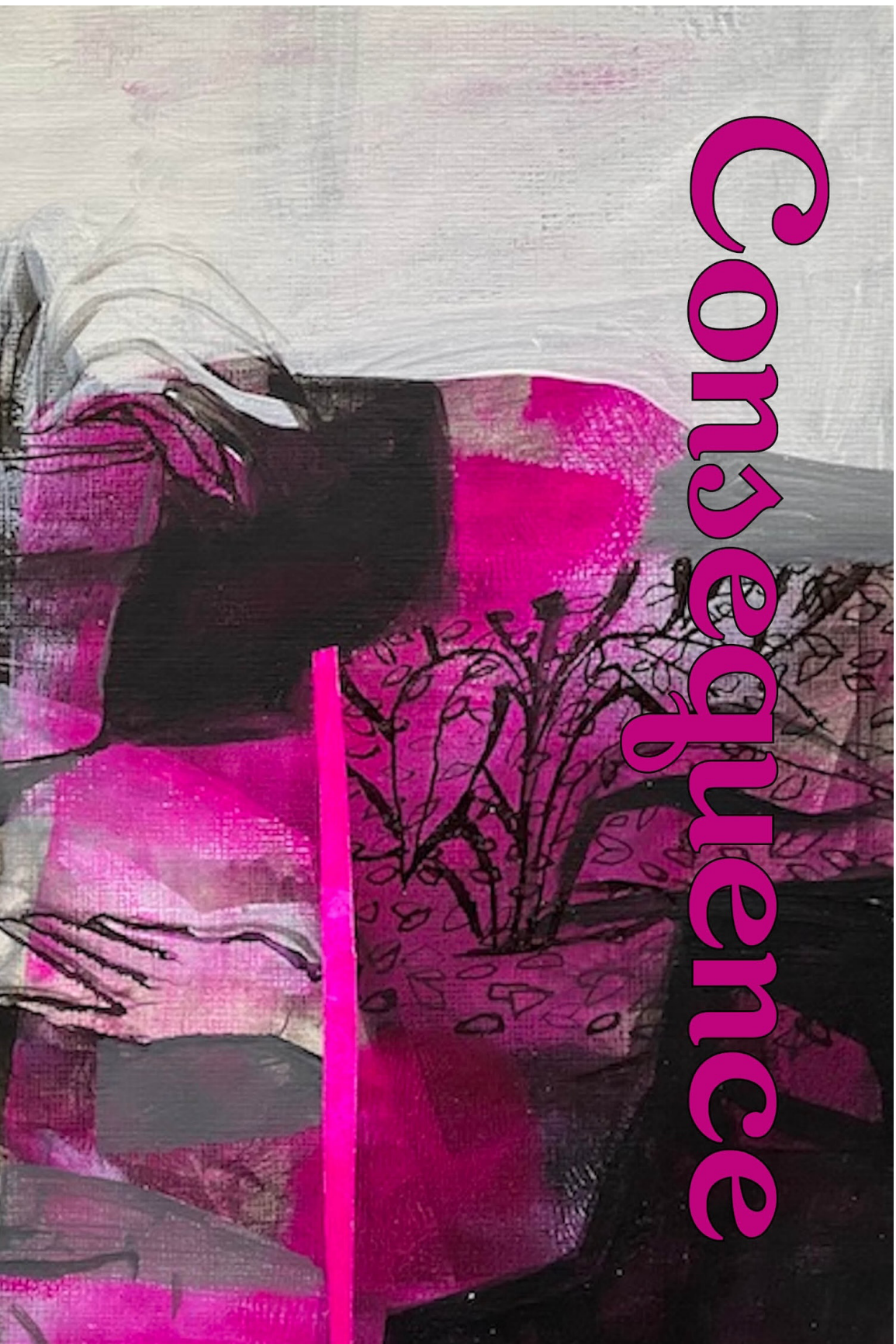


Consequence



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A literary journal addressing the
human consequences, experiences,
and realities of war and geopolitical violence

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—Dedicated to Danielle Legros Georges—

Founded by George Kovach

Elizabeth Bird

Nonfiction

CHASING GHOSTS ALONG THE NIGER

Martina spoke urgently, leaning in toward me: “I want the world to know what happened—even my own children don’t know. God knows why I had to survive: so I would have a story to tell. And that’s what I’m telling you now.”

So she told me. About the rainy Saturday in 1967, when soldiers came to her home, in search of her father, a respected teacher. They dragged him into the street and shot him, leaving Martina and her sister to bring his body home for burial. By the end of that day, she had lost dozens of members of her extended family, slaughtered in an orgy of violence along with more than a thousand neighbors. By soldiers of their nation, armed by leaders of mine.

Martina told her story in Asaba, a Nigerian town perched on a bluff over the River Niger. If you look to the east, across the great river, you can see the land whose struggle for independence launched the ferocity that took the lives of Martina’s family and so many more: Biafra.

Biafra had been a foggy memory for me—stark images of starving children, legs like sticks and bodies bloated, their hollow-cheeked mothers holding them listlessly. The first starvation brought



River Niger at Asaba | Photo by Elizabeth Bird

directly to the world's living rooms. In my teenage self-absorption, I wasn't paying much attention, but I knew that across Britain, communities were collecting money, food, and medical supplies to be airlifted into African villages. I did my bit by helping to collect wool and cotton recyclables for a children's TV show, so they could buy a hospital truck. The sort of thing that makes us all feel better about ourselves.

Years later, listening to story after horrific story, and after digging in archives on three continents, I came to better understand the tragedy of Biafra. It was not the inevitable consequence of crop failure or nature run amok as the studiously neutral food drives seemed to imply. Nor was it some inexplicable "tribal" conflict, as much media coverage suggested. It was the work of humans, not gods, and my government was complicit. The butchery in Asaba was a prelude we never knew about—our leaders made sure of that. If we had known, things might have turned out differently for Biafra. But I am getting ahead of myself.

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I traveled to Nigeria while at a crossroads in my career as an anthropologist, a career that had mostly unfolded in the United States. I was proud of my successful but tame body of research on the cultural role of media, which had meshed nicely with family life. But with kids in college and less than ten years to retirement, I was ready for something new—perhaps to make a difference in the lives of people other than fellow academics. Through a colleague, I learned about Asaba and the 1967 massacres, and I was curious. No one had been held accountable—hardly surprising, given that the commander of the perpetrators, Murtala Muhammed, later became President of Nigeria, ushering in decades of autocratic military rule. The nation had returned to democracy in 2001, and after years of silence, survivors had formed a committee to bring national awareness—maybe even to extract an apology. They needed impartial outsiders to document and validate it.

Why not me? I'd done oral history before; listening to people is what cultural anthropologists do. Knowing Nigeria can be a hard place to travel, especially for a woman alone, I enlisted the help of a historian friend; he knew even less about Nigeria than I did but

was up for a challenge. I secured a small university travel grant, and we embarked on an eight-year adventure that lives with me still.

Those hazy teenage memories weren't enough to understand the tragedy of Biafra or Asaba, so I began a crash course on Nigerian history in the university library. It's a long and tortuous story, rooted in colonialism. From 1914, when the British created Nigeria by cobbling together dozens of distinct territories, they administered it as three regions. The North, West, and East were each dominated by one of the three largest ethnic groups—of which there are over two hundred. The North was the land of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani, traditionally ruled hierarchically by emirs. The Yoruba and Igbo, both missionized into Christianity, but with their own traditional cultures, dominated the South—the Yoruba to the west of the Niger and Igbo to the east. From the beginning, it was a contentious and unstable arrangement.

Nigeria gained independence in 1960, and conflict among the three regions soon rose to a boiling point, with elections collapsing amid fraud and violence. The entrepreneurial Igbo, who had embraced Western education, dominated the professions and civil service, spreading across the country in key positions. In 1966, resentful Hausa mobs turned on the Igbo living in the North, slaughtering hundreds, and causing thousands more to flee back east. Two failed coups followed, and in 1967, believing they weren't safe in Nigeria, Igbo leaders seceded, proclaiming the Eastern Region the Sovereign State of Biafra. They were confident that their resourceful, educated leadership could build a successful, independent nation, beholden to no colonial power. They would have oil, first extracted in their territory in the late 1950s, and approaching its full potential in the 1960s.

It was not to be. Nigeria was not about to lose this precious resource to the breakaway nation. And the British, whose post-independence hold was still tight, were determined to maintain control of oil production, especially at a time when Middle East supplies were uncertain. War broke out in 1967, and federal troops rolled toward the Biafran capital, armed with British guns, tanks, and ammunition. International media predicted the “police action” would be over by Christmas.

Asaba was in Nigeria, not Biafra. But most of its ten thousand people were Igbo—culturally somewhat distinct from their cousins across the river but maintaining close ties. In summer 1967, in response to the Nigerian attacks farther north, the Biafran army

made an ill-fated incursion across the new Niger bridge. Their goal was to take the capital, Lagos, three hundred miles to the West. They never made it, and within weeks were fleeing back, pursued by federal troops. Escaping over the bridge from Asaba into Biafra, they blew it up as they left.

Marooned in Asaba, the ill-disciplined troops began to wreak havoc — burning, looting, and shooting civilians indiscriminately. Made up of various ethnicities, some were nursing grudges against Igbo people; others simply saw opportunities for enrichment. Homes were ransacked and people killed for their cars or money; panic gripped the town. Elders, after debating how to stop the carnage, called the townspeople to gather, offering gifts of money and pledging loyalty to “One Nigeria.” Dressed in ceremonial white, they came in the hundreds to the main street, dancing, chanting, carrying makeshift banners, and forming a procession through town, led by titled men and elders. One Nigeria, One Nigeria, One Nigeria. . . .

Speaking in Hausa, an officer accepted their gifts. Then he ordered the removal of women and children, and herded men and boys into an open square, before revealing trucks carrying mounted machine guns. The order was given, and as a light rain fell, hundreds were mowed down. From a distance, the women heard the gunfire late into the evening. The date is etched in Asaba memory: October 7.

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When we began work, I wondered if people would want to speak after so long a silence, especially to white foreigners. But the citizen committee believed our outsider status and university affiliation was crucial in establishing credibility in a nation where ethnic rivalries are a constant undercurrent. And there was a reservoir of pent-up pain, waiting to burst its dam. Over the next seven years, we recorded the stories of more than a hundred witnesses, not only in Asaba, but also in Lagos and diaspora communities in the US and UK.

They took us with them into moments burned in their memories. Christopher, a high school student, joined the parade with friends, realizing too late what was about to happen. Even as shooting began, he couldn’t believe soldiers would slaughter their own



Asaba Memorial 2017 \ Photo by Elizabeth Bird

people: “People were praying: ‘Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.’” But they did. Christopher survived, buried under the bodies of those who fell around him.

Peter, another teenager, remembered that when soldiers began to sort men from women, mothers began frantically disguising sons as girls: “I’m thinking, my mother is not here, what can I do?” He too lay under the bodies of others until night fell, as did thirteen-year-old Ify, who saw his brother and father die in a hail of bullets.

Others died away from the main killing field. High school student Nicholas found himself in a macabre line at a football ground: one by one, boys had to dig a shallow grave, stand in front of it, and be shot. The next in line covered the body with dirt. Nicholas filled his grave and prepared to die, when an officer appeared, reprimanded the soldiers, and told the survivors to run. To this day, he believes God saved him; I can’t help but wonder where God was when his classmates died around him.

Throughout the evening of October 7, survivors searched for loved ones, some bringing them home in wheelbarrows and carts. There are no cemeteries in Igbo culture; the dead are buried at home, outside the house or under the floor, where their spirits bring comfort to the living. Funeral rites are important in ensuring a peaceful transition. There were none for the dead of Asaba, and often no one to claim the corpses, as many survivors had fled in terror.

Among the torrent of images, one captured for me the horror. Felix, then thirteen years old, described his first ever encounter with death, as he tried to return home in the aftermath. His path was blocked by a heap of bodies. As bullets flew in the distance, Felix panicked and started to climb the heap, desperate to get home. Brain matter and blood soaked his legs as he struggled over, only to meet two soldiers, sitting in the street. Sitting on a swollen corpse, casually drinking palm wine. “I didn’t know whether I was dreaming or I was still in this world.”

Troops ordered citizens to dig mass graves for the bodies that littered the town. The exact number is unknown but was at least one thousand. No family was untouched, and some lost multiple generations. Women, losing the protection of their menfolk, were harassed and raped by the occupying soldiers. “They treated us like animals,” one told me, tears springing in her eyes. And amid all the horror, there were more noble stories—of soldiers of all ethnicities who repudiated the atrocities and guided people to safety. They are remembered with gratitude and honor.

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When we started the project in 2009, I thought it wouldn’t take long. We would interview survivors and turn over the tapes and transcripts to the citizen committee, who would take it from there. But as more people came forward, Asaba kept drawing us



Elizabeth Bird with Massacre Witness Martina Osaji

back. It wasn't just the stories, but the experiences we had and the relationships we built on the banks of the Niger. The committee members, now our friends, were led by an attorney who had lost his mother in 1967, and who was a titled Asaba chief. They made sure we did things right. At the beginning, they secured us an audience with the *Asagba*, the traditional ruler of Asaba, and his council of senior chiefs, whose blessing we needed to proceed. A genial man in his nineties, the Asagba had come to the throne after retiring from a career in academic medicine at the University of North Carolina. In more private moments, he reminisced with us about America, but public audiences were decidedly formal. Like all such occasions, they began with the ceremonial breaking of the cola nut, followed by prayers and speeches of welcome. My colleague spoke for us; in the patriarchal Igbo culture, he was usually assumed to be the leader, at least at first. "The Professor and the Lady" was one designation that made me bite my tongue, forcing a reckoning between my anthropological training in cultural respect and often galling realities.

We kept going back at least yearly, growing ever more comfortable. During the first trip, our partners provided an armed escort to pick us up at the airport—white foreigners, or *oyibo*, were regular targets of kidnappers. Traveling the highway from Lagos, we were advised to "stay inconspicuous" as we stopped at checkpoints along the road, manned by the VIPs—the "Vandals in Power," as one friend wryly called the police. In Asaba, we were warned never to walk around town unescorted, and guards were occasionally offered when we were out and about. But it quickly became apparent that uniformed teenagers toting machine guns tend to draw more, rather than less, attention, and restrictions faded away. We looked forward to seeing familiar faces on each visit. Martina, the young girl who buried her father so long ago, had grown up to become an educator and a kind friend. She made sure we had appropriate outfits to wear on occasions like the annual commemorations that started when our work began, after years of government suppression. Measurements were taken on one trip, and beautiful white outfits were ready next time. She gifted us with *akwa ocha*—the distinctive white, woven cloths that are tied around the waist for special occasions. When we ventured into town, we were greeted with smiles, waves, and cries of "You are welcome." We attended weddings and festivals, and visited the bronze-casters

in Benin City, marveling at their ancient craft. The Omu, who represents the women of Asaba, presented us with ceremonial cow-skin fans, and smilingly dubbed me *Ada Ababa* — daughter of Asaba.

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Meanwhile, the work became increasingly personal for me. I had lived for years in America, but I felt my British identity in Asaba. The colonial past was everywhere: In the impressive but dilapidated building on the bluff, once HQ of the Royal Niger Company, which ruthlessly controlled commerce on the Niger until the turn of the twentieth century, when the government took over. In the “European Cemetery,” with its stone crosses and gravestones, memorializing men who came to make their fortunes as soldiers or tradesmen, before succumbing to malaria or violence.

Captain Reginald Eric Duncan Campbell, Governor of Asaba Prisons, second son of Sir Alexander Campbell, Sergeant at Arms to the Queen.

In the churches and mission schools — reminders of the destruction of traditional belief systems, chronicled in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It’s little wonder that Achebe embraced the Biafran cause.

At the same time, I felt oddly at home. Many people we met had studied in Britain and sent their children to British universities. English Premier League soccer games played out in hotels and public places, and people discussed them passionately. Are you Chelsea Blue or Man United Red? My affinity with then-lowly Newcastle United drew sighs of sympathy. While comments about the bitter and exploitive history between our nations were not uncommon, I learned with amazement and gratitude that being British attracted smiles and moments of recognition. Such is the complex, love-hate legacy of colonialism.

And the more I learned about the past, the more I understood British complicity in the sufferings we were recording. No British soldier set foot in Asaba; Nigerians murdered Nigerians. But the through line was becoming clear, and I needed to tease out the whole story, with travel to more archives and immersion in newspapers and obscure research. I became determined there

would be a book on Asaba for the permanent record, and I wanted it in people's hands to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre. My colleague was a wonderful partner, and we constantly shared our thoughts as our work evolved. But his own research on American labor history remained his priority. It was up to me to push the project forward—writing the grants we needed to continue, securing a publisher, and drafting the book.

For me, whether driven by a sense of duty to those who had trusted us with their stories, or by my lingering British guilt, the goal was no longer just to record. I wanted to understand the consequences of Asaba, placing it into the larger story of the Biafra war. Today, it's hard to imagine that such bloodshed could go unnoticed, but absent independent media on the ground, news did not filter out to the wider world. I tracked down a British journalist who had passed through the outskirts of Asaba a few days later, under the watchful eye of federal troops. Although Asaba seemed deserted, he had no inkling of the systematic massacre that had just decimated the male population.

But those in power did know, as excavations in once-classified documents in the British National Archives showed. The British and Nigerian governments had constructed a careful narrative: The war was progressing nicely, troops guided by a Code of Conduct ordered by President Yakubu Gowon, an officer trained at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. If the public had got wind of what had happened, there would have been difficult questions. British leaders were nervous; there had already been scattered reports of civilian killings before Asaba. As a confidential memo in the archives noted, "There is no doubt that a further round of Igbo-hunting will make it very difficult for us to refrain from condemning the Federal Military Government."

But when "Igbo-hunting" came to Asaba, there was studied silence. A young Asaba woman, Celestina, managed to get a letter to her brother, a priest studying at Oxford University. She described the devastation, and the death of their two brothers, concluding simply: "Pray for us." Her brother tried to get the attention of authorities but was brushed off, and her letter ended up buried in an archive in Oxford. We found it years later—the only surviving document written at the time of the killing.

I came to believe that if the atrocities in Asaba had been known, a groundswell of opposition just might have derailed the war—or at least the pipeline of weaponry that made it so lethal. That photos of bloodied corpses, piled high in the streets, might have shocked the world and stirred the conscience of the British authorities. Before the troops swept into Biafra. Before the government ordered a blockade on the upstart nation, triggering the deadly famine. Before the vicious bombing of markets and hospitals, still funded by Britain. In 1968, months after the massacres, a brief story appeared in a British newspaper, relying on official Nigerian sources that Igbo in Asaba had been killed “by mistake.” It went unnoticed; it was not until much later, when the blockade had done its job, and images of famine reverberated worldwide, that serious opposition began to grow. I remember some moments—John Lennon returning his MBE to the Queen in protest; Joan Baez and Jimi Hendrix performing at a relief concert; Bruce Mayrock, a twenty-year-old Columbia University student, dying ablaze outside the UN.

But as thousands succumbed to bombardment and starvation, the British government of PM Harold Wilson brazened it out; the official position was that arms were provided for “defensive” purposes. It worked; the war dragged on until 1970, with Biafra’s abject surrender and at least one million dead. Wilson once said he would “accept half a million dead Biafrans if that was what it took” to ensure British interests in Nigeria; I don’t suppose an extra half million made him lose sleep.

President Gowon was thirty-two years old when he took the Nigerian Federation to war, sending daily reports to London. He was over eighty when we talked with him in his home in Abuja, the new Nigerian capital, where he lived as an elder statesman after years of exile in Britain following his removal from power in a 1975 coup. He regretted what happened in Asaba, but he assured us he knew nothing at the time. If he had, of course, he would have held the perpetrators accountable. We knew this was untrue; we’d seen documents that showed his government knew something terrible had devastated the town, though certainly not at his orders. But his fifty-year-old narrative was firm, and it seemed both impolite and futile to press the point as we drank tea

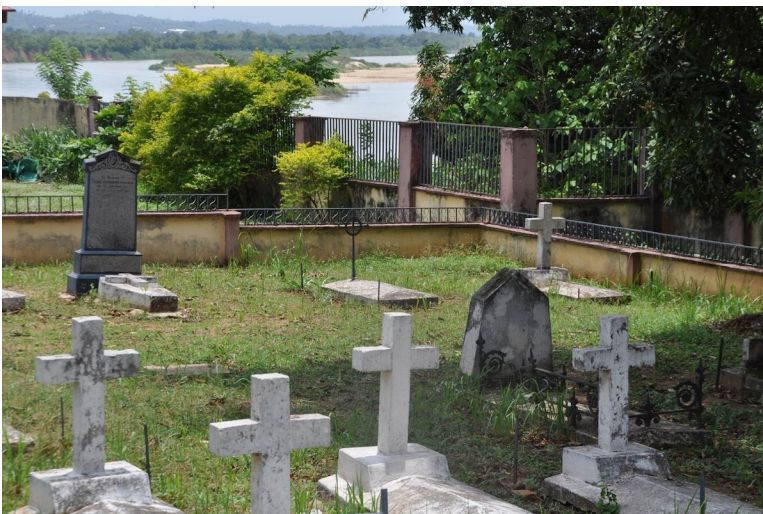
in his pleasant living room. As for Biafra—all those dead civilians were the necessary price to preserve the unity of the country.

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After months of frantic writing, the book came out in time for the fiftieth anniversary in 2017. Our friends planned a launch as part of the solemn commemoration, and we found ourselves on stage in an Asaba ballroom, talking with politicians, local dignitaries, and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, who years before had been imprisoned for opposing the war. Finally, the people of Asaba were gaining national attention, and I felt exhilarated—and a little starstruck. I will always remember a moment when I ventured out into the streets the day before, while my colleague rested at the hotel. Under an escort's watchful eye, I was swept up by crowds of women, gathering to dance and pray at the site of the small cenotaph that had been finished that year. They embraced me with hugs and smiles—welcome back, *Ada Ababa!*

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I returned only once more, to launch a second book on Biafra at a festival in Lagos, happy at the opportunity to meet up with some Asaba friends. When I retired that year, my active role was over.



Expatriate cemetery Asaba | Photo by Elizabeth Bird

It's still with me, though. The Memorial Committee still seeks a formal apology and official recognition, and I hear from Asaba regularly. A new documentary has been made; I am invited to speak at its London premiere. Last year, the Committee planted one thousand trees throughout the town, symbolizing those lost. Some are barely saplings, but they will grow if tended.

Nigerian social media is still rife with lies about Asaba. It was caused by a Biafran saboteur. Only a few dozen died. It's just the Igbo whining again. It never happened at all. I am glad to have had some role in setting the record straight. Even if copies of the book are already gathering dust, it will remain a source for anyone who cares, along with the website I built to preserve history and testimony.

Beyond that, I am not sure. Survivors told us over and over that they needed their loved ones' stories to be told. They wanted history to record the names; surely, they died for something? Many invoked the familiar holocaust cry—"Never Again"—hoping their stories would help prevent such atrocities in the future.

But we all know that's a forlorn hope. Long before Asaba, and in the fifty years since, humanity has rarely been constrained by the lessons of history.

I thought of that anew when another October 7 dawned to another nightmare, and another slaughter at the hands of men who claimed to be "soldiers." And then later, as thousands more innocents died because of that outrage, funded by another world power. Very different, of course; every massacre leaves its unique fingerprint on history. And yet somehow it feels the same—another tsunami of violence sweeping over the earth, leaving only rubble behind.

I remember Asaba with affection, as I think of dancing to drums in the street, surrounded by smiling women, or drinking Star beer while the sun set over the great river Niger. I believe the work was important—the right thing to do. I'm glad it capped my academic career. But in darker moments, I find myself asking if it really mattered. Did telling Asaba's story make any difference? Or was it just something to feel good about—little more than bundling up old wool as I did as a teenager, and sending it into the void?

Contributors' Notes

Lou-Ellen Barkan is a native New Yorker, relocated to the Berkshires where she teaches creative writing and runs a writers' group. Two children, six grandchildren, four dogs, and three careers have produced enough material for a lifetime of stories, some of which are available at www.clippings.me/lebarkan. She holds a BA Summa Cum Laude from Hunter College and an MA from Columbia University.

Elham Bayati is an Iranian-American visual artist whose work explores themes of identity, gender, and cultural displacement. Using mixed media, collage, and painting, she layers personal and collective histories to examine the tensions between her Iranian heritage and life in the US. Bayati's work has been exhibited internationally in group exhibitions and recognized for its evocative storytelling. She is also a dedicated educator, teaching at the Columbus College of Art & Design. Through her art, she seeks to amplify the voices of women and those navigating the complexities of dual cultural existence.

A retired Anthropology Professor, **Elizabeth Bird** published many academic articles and seven books (two dealing with the Nigeria-Biafra War) before turning to creative writing. Her work appears in *Under the Sun* (winner, Readers' Choice Award 2022), *Biostories*, *Streetlight*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, *HerStrY*, *The Guardian*, *Mutha Magazine*, *5Elements Review*, *Heimat Review*, *Summerset Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay "Interlude: 1941" was named a Notable in Best American Essays 2023. Her website is www.lizbirdwrites.com; her Asaba Memorial website is at www.asabamemorial.org.

Berend ter Borg is forty-six, from the Netherlands, and living in Germany.

Zachary Bos has published poetry, essays, short fiction, reviews, and translation in venues such as *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Battersea Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Iowa Review* online, *Literary Imagination*, *Berfrois*, *Morning Star*, and *Lotus-Eater*. He has been a finalist for *The American Poetry Review's* Hearst Prize; the Waywiser Press Hecht Prize; the 92Y Discovery Prize; and the Disquiet Literary Prize. He resides in Massachusetts, where he directs Pen & Anvil Press from an office above Bonfire Bookshop.

Sali Bouba Oumarou is a Cameroonian independent scholar, journalist, and writer. He lives in Tangiers, in northern Morocco, and uses literature to popularize the results of his research, which focuses on the media, migration, and peace. He is regularly invited by various organizations to give lectures on his areas of interest.

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