“We die only once, and for such a long time”
— Approaching Trauma through Translocation in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*¹

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I don’t know how long I die. But I think I die for very very long time.²

Many scholars in the field of postcolonial studies are familiar with the work of Chris Abani, an author of Nigerian and English parentage now living in the USA. Even though his poetic writing style and emotional subtlety enjoy wide recognition, in-depth analyses of his texts are still relatively few. This can, of course, partly be explained by the fact that his major novels and collections of poetry have only been published recently. However, it seems that this scarcity of critical studies can also be traced to the elusiveness of Abani’s art, by which I mean that his works strongly resist textbook postcolonial approaches – theories which, despite their limitations, still offer interpretative avenues into much contemporary African literature of the diaspora. This is not to say that the author’s books do not provide reflections on the postcolonial condition and its inherent hybridity or, in the current context of globalization, on adjacent themes such as metropolitan cosmopolitanism. These cross-cultural currents arguably form

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the background to his prose and poetry, and their role has been cogently underlined in existing examinations of his writing. However, while Abani himself has respectfully acknowledged the usefulness of such culturally oriented approaches, he has also stated that the principal focus of his works – his novels in particular – lies elsewhere: namely, in their exploration of “transformation.”

The entire body of Abani’s fiction is indeed informed by changes in physical and emotional states, and, more generally, his texts are replete with crossings of concrete and abstract frontiers of all kinds. It therefore comes as no surprise that an array of concepts beginning with the prefix ‘trans-’ could be used to capture the gist of his narratives and, in some cases, offer interpretative leads. For instance, ‘transgendering’ provides one of the main motifs in *The Virgin of Flames*, which features a cross-dressing artist living in Los Angeles; ‘transgression’ perhaps best characterizes the protagonists’ overstepping of moral boundaries in *Becoming Abigail*, the account of an adolescent Nigerian girl forced to emigrate to London; and ‘translocation’, as I will argue in the course of this essay, constitutes a pivotal paradigm in *Song For Night*, the story of a child soldier, set during the final days of the Biafran war, the civil conflict that divided Nigeria between 1967 and 1970.

The prefix ‘trans-’ evidently finds its roots in Latin, and etymologically means ‘across’, ‘over’, or ‘through’. Interestingly, an analogous notion occupies a central position in the broader theoretical framework in which I wish to situate my examination of Abani’s war novella: that of trauma studies, an area of investigation which has, among other things, dissected the mechanisms of working through – that is, of progressively, and often only partially, overcoming terrifying ordeals such as genocide. In its early stages, this critical movement mainly concerned itself with the repercussions and representations of the Holocaust, but in recent years its methods have been repeatedly applied to postcolonial sources. This encounter has encouraged scholars to develop a

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3 Chris Abani, reading held in the context of the “Incroci di Civiltà” series, Libreria Mondadori, Venice, Italy (29 March 2008).
6 Chris Abani, *Song for Night* (New York: Akashic, 2007). All page references will be given in the text.
7 The problems that may potentially arise from the application of a set of theories with a largely ‘Western’ cultural anchorage to postcolonial texts have been debated.