

## Chapter 2

### CONTEMPORARY PROJECTIONS: AFRICA IN THE LITERATURE OF ATROCITY (*AFTROCITY*)

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This chapter is titled after a rant piece that may have become very self-indulgent, frankly. I confess it was prepared in a state of rage at the *Economist's* usual hectoring from a holy ground attitude in describing the so-called African condition. You know how trendy it is to describe our continent as poverty stricken, Aids infested and hopeless? And if we are not doing helpless victim things we are slaughtering each other.

However, I shall share with the reader a little bit of the "Africa as the breeding ground of bestial war atrocities" media imaginings that are old. Moreover, given that this is a creative writing forum, ideas swirling out of the underlying questions situated within the topic also beckon. I shall endeavor to reflect on one or two contemporary war and violence concerns.

And finally, space permitting, attach for the reader a brief excerpt from one of my short stories called *Weight of Whispers*. It is the story of a man unable to gaze at the violent disintegration of his life until he stares into his mother's grave.

Without looking at headings, and even if the names referred to are eliminated, you and I can always tell a particular global media piece which narrates the experience of war or violence in Africa, can't we? The details given to particularly abhorrent deeds (not to minimize the excesses or to excuse the horrible deeds—but it is particularly descriptive where Africa is concerned):

You all know the catch phrases: Tribal, ethnic, savage, slaughter, barbaric, excesses, hacked to death, tore the flesh off, horrific, marauding, corrupt, bribed, for some reason--chiefs, armed men, machete wielding, genocide in Rwanda, hatred, brutal, warlords, blood dripped off the walls. *The horror, the horror*, wrote Joseph Conrad. And since then it was more comfortable to determine that darkness of heart was purely African, rather than resident in the souls of the diabolic adventurers.

For example <http://www.irinnews.org/>

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“In addition, Rwandans, some of whom took part in the 1994 genocide in the country, have turned against their Congolese "hosts"; committing atrocities that would shake the most hardened heart. Observers say that all armed groups have committed acts of sexual violence and rape but that the Interahamwe from Rwanda have been largely responsible. Since 2002, a German technical aid body GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) has been documenting the various forms of sexual violence on residents in South Kivu. The violence includes rape by individuals and gangs; incidents in which entire families are forced to watch their wives and daughters being raped, as well as forced incest. In addition, GTZ has documented victims who have had cassava stalks or gun barrels repeatedly rammed into their vaginas. Some were also shot in their organs.

*The Economist* (Nov 29, 2006) is, of course, reliably consistent in its manner of reporting anything African:

MACHINE GUN bullets zipped over the concrete walls of the Supreme Court building in Kinshasa on November 21st, as an angry crowd of flip-flop-shod street boys and plainclothes soldiers bellowed for justice. In the chaos, the policemen and *UN* peacekeepers, who should have been guarding the court, ran away. The demonstrators then set part of the court on fire and ransacked the courtroom. The next day, Joseph Kabila, who last week had been declared the winner of the presidential election, furiously gave his main rival, a former rebel named Jean-Pierre Bemba, 48 hours to remove his 600-strong private army from the capital. ...

#### **Warlords in the provinces**

In the north-eastern region of Ituri, a vast gold deposit covered by gentle green hills, murderous militiamen have become murderous soldiery. There they prey on peasant miners and increase the prospect of a return to the ethnic slaughter that claimed around 50,000 lives between 1999 and 2003. A long, rattling drive to the south, in North Kivu province, is a warlord general, Laurent Nkunda, who shows little interest in ideas of state expansion. Formerly in the *RCD*, and before that in Rwanda's army, he claims to control 20,000 square miles (52,000 sq km) of wooded hills. As the protector of North Kivu's long-persecuted people, General Nkunda has a just cause. But then, so had many of the actors in Congo's complicated war—and still the result was a slaughter. So long as Congo has no state to address pressing local complaints, its future is an open question.

You also recognise the descriptions of war and violence that describe mostly Anglo-Saxon Protestant endeavors: high morale of the troops,

peace agreement, Commander-in-Chief, tried to reason with rebels, collateral damage, heroic, precision, target, few casualties, strategic detail, B52, armed convoys, secured the area.

You get the idea: one set of people do outrageous vampire-like things, suck blood and growl, the other are rational, precise and never indulge in heinous aberrations and crimes that offend the fundamentals of creature decency.....like Abu Ghraib.

*Right?* I thought that the arrival of Bush's axis of evil might change the vocabulary and transfer slime, gore and machetes into a new species called Terrorist.

Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining, defending or lamenting anything. I am simply curious. Why do many interpreters of global information blithely need to define people - mostly of the darker hued variety - in complex, arcane description of otherness? I am curious about the seething inner realities that require that such projections are directed at 'The Other,' particularly the extreme 'other' forcibly symbolized by Africa and Africa-ness.

There is certainly a place for the idea of the other, but arguably, this is mainly in so far as the reflection on and of the *Other* allows the *I* to understand self. The problem is that the line between staying within the realms of self-understanding and racing into high pedestals of judgment—are faint indeed.

***(Mea culpa!)***

In the exploration of human excesses, in the admittedly few arenas I have ventured into mostly in Europe and the US, I noted that audiences were far more comfortable and voluble about stories from Ituri, Apartheid South Africa, Darfur and the favourite branded horror 'The Genocide in Rwanda'. I, on the other hand, wanted to hear about the interrogations of the whys and therefores, stuff that had been excavated from the soul of the human experiences of war and violence. There have been terrible laboratories to draw from: World War I, The Boer War, the African expeditions mislabeled 'The Scramble for Africa', World War II, or Vietnam, Bosnia or Chechnya and the invisible, terrifying, very modern, largely invisible War on Terror.

Mostly, I have wanted to join expeditions that seek to archive the vaults of collective silences, past and present. The hush from and about the concentration camp that is Guantanamo Bay resounds and convicts. Today it is the obscure subterranean world war that means that alleged 'high-value' prisoners are moved through secret camps across seas into

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interrogation chambers in numerous countries. Stories are slipped in with vague words like “*extraordinary renditions*” to describe war and violence gone underground. The horror fades away, captive to transitory memories. That is the problem with projections; it fogs the place between truth and hypocrisy.

### *Moving on*

Drawn from the thought areas that are likely to emerge in our encounters, it is essential, I believe, to contemplate the implications of segmenting human realities and awarding grades to ghastly manifestations and awful gestures of the human soul. Is it any wonder that the mystery of evil and its commensurate sorrows remain a perennial heart and the home of unarticulated misery in the world? Is it any wonder that the vocabulary of anguish tends to lurk hidden within hearts where reality resides with loneliness and voicelessness before horrors that we cannot understand? Do we ever wonder at the suicides of the most articulate ones, the deeply sensitive ones who were penetrated by war and violence at its most insidious — prophets like Primo Levi? What it points to are depths of anguish which so transfigures that it cannot be fully breached so that those who cry for peace can actually believe their desiring.

We understand that the violence of war are deeds of passion. Do peace actions respond with an equal and magnetic virulence? Does peace carry the same strange attraction that violence affords the human being?

I say ‘we’, but I may be making a terrible assumption that we all give a damn about the state of life of the collective human soul. That we are as passionate about the grandest dream, the daring-to-die-for-peace as Dag Hammarskjöld was. I say ‘we’ hopefully, because the gist of this piece is simple, it is this: *Nothing human is alien to me*. And just as I am capable of a grand love, a yearning for peace, I am also able to summon all the hounds of war and scream abuse and hatred and use my finger to trigger a gun’s explosion.

I wonder if the fear of looking into the reality of who we are and what we are capable of as human beings makes it necessary to look elsewhere to explain the horror that demands confrontation. You believe, as I do, that the magnitude and implication of this theme can, in no way, be restricted to a specific geographical dimension.

Joseph Conrad’s horror is easy to find.

Some rhetorical questions: In this beautiful country, do you have armament plants? A missile manufacturing facility? Bullet-making

factory? Bomb development unit? Security experts? Do you have a list of people whose profession is 'Arms trader'? You have a standing army? *What for?* Gardening? Preparation for Inter-galactic invaders? Or is all this a preparation to kill human beings somewhere - massively - humans perceived as a security threat? Why are we still afraid of one another? So afraid that it is easier to plan to kill.

(Fear. Interesting territory that. Fear and the ideology of absolutes have a way of keeping populations mesmerised and manageable, don't they?)

That word, 'security' - it needs a long and special interrogation. How widely and wildly it is used to justify all sorts of violence. We need to secure ourselves? From who? Always other human beings. Name the threat.

When we strip the so-called 'Terrorist' (*that whole territory of naming in order to reduce the reality of humanness*) of his mask and bullet or bombs, strip him or her down to the skin, we have a mere human being who loved, laughed and hoped at a point in his or her life. Who yearned and sought. Who believes? Even in madness. And madly, passionately, he or she (re)acts.

Are we that terrified of one another? Is the question about the embarrassment of our fear of the Other? Or perhaps the fear of the memory of the other? The unresolved guilt, shame, an ancient terror of a blood-stained past that has neither been wept over nor purged. There are few answers, admittedly. But there must exist some unspoken insights into the nature of the magnificent being called human who does such wondrous things that extend the boundaries of beauty and possibility and who also does such odious things that push the boundaries of evil.

I don't know. What I do know is that *Nothing human is alien to my nature.*

This war, this violence is ours. Ours is the hateful thing - a roaming stain that prowls through the society and sows seeds of chaos - that thing that appalls our within-ness. And horrifies us with the blood it wastes. Spilled like spit. We are sickened by its methods and the reasons it infects us with, to cause anguish to another. It is a colourless, raceless thing, yet its culture is singular and recognizable. When leaders entrusted with vision announce 'weapons of mass destruction' where there are none, when CNN gloats over so-called 'victory' over an already devastated country where bullet wounds were being treated with aspirin, when activists turn their gaze away when a now rabid leader uses race as the excuse to make of his people refugees. When a man in a cave activates

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young men to bomb an American embassy and calls the 200 Kenyan casualties, 'collateral.' When we see pictures of young men in orange suits who are bound, blinded and gagged and say nothing.

What makes loneliness an anguish is not that I have no one to share my burden, but this:  
I have only my own burden to share.  
(Dag Hammarskjöld)

***On another tangent:***

The stuff of nightmares exorcised on pages so the human instinct for story can be satisfied, looking to human experience as source material for scribbling. The rhapsody of the human being raptured by searingly jarring notes. There is always something that sits wrong in an otherwise perfect universe. A writer needs an antagonist, you know.

***Here is a story:***

Once upon a time, a man who held a different opinion about life was accused, scourged, beaten and had thorns pressed into his head. A Roman Procurator before whom he barely stood said to the waiting ordinary folk: Ecce Homo?

Behold the man!

Naturally, seeing the sorry face of humanity before them, the ordinary folk wanted nothing to do with him. So the procurator acceded to requests that he be crucified. But the action of the Roman procurator is interesting. He called for water and washed his hands. There is an historical rumour that he spent the rest of his life calling for water and washing his hands until they bled.

The stain. The hunger to purge when we are conscious of a disorder in which we are, somehow, implicated.

***Ecce homo.***

What then is this human beheld?

Tomorrow we shall meet,  
Death and I -  
And he shall thrust his sword  
Into one who is wide awake.  
(Dag Hammarskjöld)

An answer is sought. In all our ramblings there is something fundamental we seek.

The answer to the question of the meaning of life, that we seek to gaze upon *Wide Awake*.

And who better to ask than a man who has decided that 10 million people who call God by a different name are vermin to be eradicated? What makes a human like that? In the canvas of writing, though it is right to wail for the decimated 10 million, we can also stare at the man who decided to murder them. Who are you? You whose humanity I share whether I like it or not? You, who by your choice, has implicated me.

The prerogative of such creative writing is that one can take this man, even if he has killed himself, put him on the page and interview him. I imagine an exploration of war and violence in the place where it is all brewed and executed. Within each of us in the thin line delineating choice.

The Gestapo, as you all well know, would not have been successful in the attempted annihilation of a vilified people were it not for the J good neighbours, honest Dutch, French people who submitted names, numbers and revealed hiding places. The Interahamwe succeeded because ordinary moderates, like you and I, went berserk — for a season. Yet when you encounter the killers in the Rwanda Gacaca courts, most are as bewildered and weighed down with sorrow, more than guilt, just as so lyrically presented in the profile on South Africa's Edward de Kock (*A Human Being Died that Night*). But neither they, nor the rest of us who listen searchingly, can find the essential word to give an adequate name to what happened.

I started with a mild rant about the use of words to separate and judge shared human enigmas. I also imagine that for those involved in the creative articulation of experiences, there is also a great opportunity to existing in which to have an intense dialogue with the numerous archetypes of violence or evil that inhabit each of our cultures and shadier imaginations: Shadows, Demons, Ogre, Tokoloshe's. We call them by many names, Satan, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Hannibal Lecter, Hel—the Norse queen of hell, perhaps Loki, vampires...

A chance to excavate silences for the grail of the perfect word that might trigger the relief we seek from selves we have known, seen, felt and feared violently.

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*Excerpt from 'Weight of Whispers'*

The collection of teeth on the man's face is a splendid brown. I have never seen such teeth before. Refusing all instruction, my eyes focus on dental contours and craters. Denuded of any superficial pretence; no braces, no fillings, no toothbrush, it is a place where small scavengers thrive.

"Evidence!" The man giggles.

A flash of green and my US\$50 disappears into his pocket. His fingers prod: shirt, coat, trousers. He finds the worked snake skin wallet. No money in it, just a picture of Agnethe-mama, Lune and Chi-Chi, elegant and unsmiling, diamonds in their ears, on their necks and wrists. The man tilts the picture this way and that, returns the picture into the wallet. The wallet disappears into another of his pockets. The man's teeth gleam.

"Souvenir." Afterwards, a hiccupping "Greeheeeereeehee" not unlike a *National Geographic* hyena, complete with a chorus from the pack.

"Please...it's...my mother...all I have".

His eyes become thin slits, head tilts and the veins on his right eye pulse. His nostrils flare, an indignant goat.

A thin sweat-trail runs down my spine, the backs of my knees tingle. I look around at the faceless others in the dank room. His hand grabs my goatee and twists. My eyes smart. I lift up my hand to wipe them. The man sees the gold insignia ring, glinting on my index finger. The ring of the royal household. One of only three. The second belonged to my father. Agnethe-mama told me that when father appeared to her in a dream to tell her he was dead, he was still wearing it. The third ...no one has ever spoken about.

The Policeman's grin broadens. He pounces. Long fingers. A girl would cut her hair for fingers like his. He spits on my finger, and draws out the ring with his teeth; the ring I have worn for 18 years - from the day I was recognised by the priests as a man and a prince. It was supposed to have been passed on to the son I do not have. The policeman twists my hand this way and that, his tongue caught between his teeth; a study of concentrated avarice.

"Evidence!"

Gargoyles are petrified life-mockers, sentries at entry points, sentinels of sorrow, spitting at fate. I will try to protest.

"It is sacred ring...Please...please." To my shame, my voice breaks.

"Evidence!"

Cheek: nerve, gall, impertinence, brashness.



Cheek: the part of my face he chose to brand.

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Later on, much later on, I will wonder what makes it possible for one man to hit another for no reason other than the fact that he can. But now, I lower my head. The sum total of what resides in a very tall man who used to be a prince in a land eviscerated.

Two presidents died when a missile launched from land forced their plane down. A man of note, a prince had said, on the first day, that the perpetrators must be hunted down. That evil must be purged from lives. That is all the prince had meant. It seems someone heard something else. It emerges later on, when it is too late, that an old servant took his obligation too far, in the name of his prince.

We had heard rumour of a holocaust, of a land hemorrhaging to death. Everywhere, hoarse murmurs, eyes white and wide with an arcane fear. Is it possible that brothers would machete sisters-in-law to stew-meat size chunks in front of nephews and nieces?

It was on the fifth day after the Presidents had disintegrated with their plane, that I saw that the zenith of existence cannot be human.

In the seasons of my European sojourn, Brussels, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, rarely London, a city I could, then, accommodate a loathing to, I wondered about the unsaid; hesitant signals and interminable reminders of 'What They Did'. Like a mnemonic device, the swastika would grace pages and, or screens, at least once a week, unto perpetuity. I wondered.

I remembered a conversation in Krakow with an academician, a man with primeval eyes. A pepper-coloured, quill-beard obscured the man's mouth, and seemed to speak in its place. I was, suddenly, in the thrall of an irrational fear; that the mobile barbs would shoot off his face and stab me.

I could not escape.

I had agreed to offer perspectives on his seminal work, a work in progress he called 'A Mystagogy of Human Evil'. I had asked, meaning nothing, a prelude to commentary:

"Are you a Jew?"

So silently, the top of his face fell, flowed towards his jaw, his formidable moustache-beard lank, his shoulders shaking, his eyes flooded with tears. But not a sound emerged from his throat. Unable to tolerate the tears of another man, I walked away.

Another gathering, another conversation, with another man. Mellowed by the well being engendered by a goblet of Rémy Martin, I

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ventured an opinion about the sacrificial predilection of being; the necessity of oblation of men by men to men.

"War is the excuse", I said. I was playing with words, true, but, oddly the exchange petered into mumbles of 'Never Again'.

A year later, at a balcony party, when I asked the American Consul in Luxembourg to suggest a book which probed the slaughter of Germans during World War II, she said:

"By whom?"

Before I could answer, she had spun away, turning her back on me as if I had asked "Cain, where is your brother?"

What had been Cain's response?

To my amusement, I was, of course, never invited to another informal diplomatic gathering. Though I would eventually relinquish my European postings - in order to harness, to my advantage, European predilection for African gems - over après-diner Drambuie, now and again, I pondered over what lay beneath the unstated.

Now, my world has tilted into a realm where other loaded silences lurk. And I can sense why some things must remain buried in silence, even if they resuscitate themselves at night in dreams where blood pours out of phantom mouths. In the empire of silence, the 'turning away' act is a vain exorcism of a familiar daemon, which invades the citadels we never change, we constantly fortify. Dragging us back through old routes of anguish, screeching: "Your nature relishes fratricidal blood."

But to be human is to be intrinsically, totally, resolutely good. Is it not?

The devil laughs at such protestations.