

EDITORIAL

Reflections on genocide in Africa

For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and living. . . . To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time. (Elie Wiesel, 2006, p. xv)

Next year, 2014, marks the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, a genocide that evokes passion and bafflement as a new generation of Rwandese as well as scholars and international agencies come to terms with the horror that was wreaked within a very short span of time. Nevertheless, there is much that is contested about the genocide, its causes, the role of the current government, the role of the international community and the causes of the failure of the very agencies that were charged with the responsibility that such devastation would never occur. There is also much controversy about the numbers of people killed. The forensic nature of postgenocide Rwanda is marked by a predominance of numbers, statistics and killing technologies that were deployed. The minutiae of the facts and figures have become salient not only for the purposes of documenting and memorialising, but also as part of the judicial process both through the international courts as well as through local institutions such as the *gacaca* courts. It is also the site through which much of the subsequent violence in the region has been mediated, especially in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As the title of Gerard Prunier's (2009) book suggests, it is the central location of *Africa's World War*.

Prunier has captured the absurdity of the violence of nearly twenty years as the 'Great Lakes crisis', a crisis that is the product of governments consumed by other wars, as well as a post 9/11 world that has rendered a public that increasingly has a very short attention span. He captures the extreme violence and carnage of the region as a storyboard chronology that illustrates the banal violence that Achille Mbembe (2001, 2003) has so vividly described in *On the Postcolony*. The chronology is as follows:

- 1994: Genocide in Rwanda. Horror.
- 1995: Festering camps. Keep feeding them and it will eventually work out.
- 1996: Refugees have gone home. It is now all over except in Zaire.
- 1997: Mobutu has fallen. Democracy has won.
- 1998: Another war. These people are crazy.
- 1999: Diplomats are negotiating. It will eventually work out.
- 2000: Blank.
- 2001: President Kabila is shot. But his son seems like a good sort, doesn't he?
- 2002: Pretoria Peace Agreement. We are now back to normal.
- 2003: These fellows still insist on money. What is the minimum price?
- 2004: Do you think Osama bin Laden is still alive?
- 2005: Three million Africans have died. This is unfortunate.

- 2006: Actually it might be four million. But since the real problem is Al Qaeda, this remains peripheral.
- 2007: They have had their election, haven't they? Then everything should be all right (Prunier, 2009, pp. xxxv–xxxvi)

The trauma and the effects of the genocide have not only affected Rwanda but the entire Great Lakes region. The region has witnessed a continual cycle of violence which can be traced to the aftermath of the genocide and the power machinations that dictate the radical and rapid changes that are underway. In Rwanda we are clearly witnessing a sea change, some sort of leap into an alternative modernity that was never envisaged or indeed one that had a causal link to the genocide. Nevertheless, the genocide facilitated the spawning of this new modernity. As Prunier notes there is a 'differential modernity is at work. The warlords, the peasants, the dashing instant neocapitalists the refugees, the *kadogos*, the traders, the NGO employees, the satellite phone providers, are all part of an enormous transformation whose historical consequences are still unknown' (2009, p. xxxvii).

All this necessitates that we must learn to disentangle ourselves from the violence, that there is a need to take a step back that 'enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance' (Zizek, 2006, p. 1). As we approach the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, it is time to take stock and consider why Africa continues to remain on the very margins of the Western media and popular imaginary. For violence remains at the heart of that imaginary, as it has done for centuries. For the continent is crucial to Global North–US militarism, and specifically the Cold War with China, for control of energy-supply routes. This element is not mentioned in the Pentagon's mission statement about Africom, its 'permanent' presence in the continent that began five years ago: 'US Africa Command protects and defends the national security interests of the United States by strengthening the defense capabilities of African states and regional organizations and, when directed, conducts military operations, in order to deter and defeat transnational threats and to provide a security environment conducive to good governance and development' (US Africom, 2013). But is the next phase of imperial control?

References

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