

History, Nation, Ghetto: Kenyan Women's Literature and the Ethics of Responsibility

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In Yvonne Owuor's short story "Weight of Whispers," a Tutsi prince escaping from the Rwandan genocide laments the loss of his privileged life to the nostalgic tune of the "Indépendance Cha Cha Cha."¹ Once, the desire for political power and sovereignty was immortalized in Kabasele's well-known song; now the historical figures lauded in the upbeat celebration of Independence—Lumumba, Tshombe and Kasavubu—have become martyrs and assassins, the ghosts of a past which failed to deliver on its promise of peace and prosperity. As the prince applauds the colonial divisions of race and ethnicity from which he has profited, Kabasele's famed song transforms from celebratory dance into the routine performance of epistemological and institutional violence.

In their search for shelter from state-sponsored persecution, the protagonists of Owuor's "Weight of Whispers," and *A Farm Called Kishinev* by Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye will only be disappointed by the exclusionary practices of the modern nation-state and its insistence on the oppositional categories of "settler" and "native," "citizen" and "stranger". In the narratives of Owuor and Macgoye, modern institutions generate divisive political identities which encourage the production of moral apathy towards those marked as "different" and therefore excluded from the protection of the state.² To ensure their survival, even those displaced by the Holocaust will eventually appropriate the institutional apparatus of the nation-state to contain unruly minorities. Meanwhile, a "Tutsi prince" is victimized by the racialized identity he was once eager to embrace. Victims can indeed become killers, while those responsible for today's (epistemic) violence might be tomorrow's victims.³

As "difference" mutates into a source of conflict, leaving women and children especially vulnerable to organized hostility, these narratives enter into a constructive dialogue with scholars who question the etiological myths equating the modern with civilizational progress and the social production of moral responsibility. Of particular relevance here is Bauman's work on modernity and the Holocaust, his examination of the systematic murder of a population

¹ Joseph Kabasele and African Jazz, "Indépendance Cha Cha Cha," rec. June 1960, *Africa—Golden Afrique Vol. 2*, Network Medien, 2005. In the short story, his name is spelled Kabasellé.

² Owuor, "Weight of Whispers"; Macgoye, *A Farm Called Kishinev*.

³ See Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*.

deemed a threat to national integrity and racial exclusivity, as well as his discussion of the unruly figure of the stranger, who troubles the neat binary of friend and foe upon which the modern state predicates its political maneuvers. On these issues, Bauman's arguments productively engage with Mbembe's analysis of the shifting institutional landscape of the "African postcolony," where new forms of privatized sovereignty and violence have remapped the geographies of power and space.⁴ The struggle for political control and resources often invites the reinvention of identity "through manipulation of 'indigeneness' and ancestral descent" (Mbembe *Postcolony* 86).⁵ As the identity of citizen is primarily conceived in ethnic and territorial terms, the crisis of the nation-state produces a corresponding crisis of citizenship in East Africa's Great Lakes region.

Macgoye's and Owuor's texts thus engage the rhetoric of violence that has often preoccupied Kenyan women's literature. From Muthoni Likimani's examination of Gikuyu identity at the time of the liberation war, to Asenath Odaga's concern with building a multi-ethnic nation and the rejection of ethnic stereotypes in the romances of Carolyne Adalla and Pamela Ngurukie, Kenyan women writers have confronted (post-) colonial fictions of race and ethnicity in their struggle for ethically responsible ways of living with "others." Owuor and Macgoye extend this discussion in new and original ways when examining the politics of identity that shape the struggle for power and resources in colonial and postcolonial contexts. What unites these award-winning narratives is their interest in the historical processes through which nations and the political identities they generate have turned into confining ghettos.⁶ As they examine how "Jewish" and "Tutsi" identities are politically manipulated to operate as a source of victimization *and* of privilege, they suggest parallels between different historical scenarios of genocidal violence. But rather than addressing the physical violence directed against particular populations, the narratives reveal the enabling conditions of genocidal violence and are particularly concerned with the epistemic violence of identity discourses that establish privileged and disenfranchised positions

⁴ Mbembe refers here to the economic and political shifts of the late 1970s when, pressured by structural adjustment programs and deregulated world markets, African political systems struggled to profitably reintegrate themselves into changing global economies. Deregulated policies undermined the material and social bases of postcolonial states and the strategies through which they secured legitimacy. Such uneven economic shifts, argues Mbembe, furthered the internal dissolution of the state, which found its sovereignty restricted by the tutelary government of international creditors. The demands of global markets and political attempts to restore authoritarian rule create the conditions for private government, as public functions are increasingly performed by private operators for private ends. Privatized forms of sovereignty reinforce the privatization of the instruments of violence because "control of the means of coercion makes it possible to secure an advantage in the other conflicts under way for the appropriation of resources and other utilities formerly concentrated in the state" (*Postcolony* 78).

⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* and *Modernity and Ambivalence*; Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, "At the Edge of the World" and "Faces of Freedom."

⁶ In 2007, Macgoye won the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature for her novel. Owuor received the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2003.

within the nation. Since only select social groups are granted the privilege of citizenship, the exclusionary practices of the nation-state relate as much to the physical borders of political territories as to the epistemological boundaries between “citizen” and “stranger.”

Postcolonial studies can ill afford to neglect the narratives of Owuor and Macgoye and their productive dialogue with scholars who examine the political manipulation of identity. When the fictional texts expose the historical formation and rhetorical construction of ethnic and racial identities, they challenge the reader to reflect on the ethics of being human. Though their search for other ways to live might still be incomplete, as I argue in this article, their concern with the historical cycle of violence deserves our attention as readers, critics and citizens. Interestingly, it is this search for sustaining social relationships that the fictional narratives share with Mbembe and Bauman, who both turn to the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, in their quest for responsible ways of living with each other.

In *A Farm Called Kishinev*, Macgoye imagines what might have happened had the Zionist Congress accepted the 1903 British proposal of territory in East Africa. The offer itself is as much an effort to reaffirm the image of a “new enlightened century” (14), tainted by the persistence of anti-Semitic violence, as it is a political strategy to protect the British homeland from the increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.⁷ The text reclaims Kishinev, a town in what was then Russian-administered Bessarabia and the location of a harrowing pogrom, as a site of memory that physically inscribes the experience of anti-Semitic violence into the Kenyan landscape. Yet, even as the novel’s adventurous traveler Isaac Wilder implements his vision of a Jewish National Home, the utopia reclaiming Kenyan colonial space as a refuge assumes decidedly dystopic qualities. For a population with an ambiguous position within the fictions of “race” and “nation”, an ideal political state might indeed be difficult to imagine. Thus the novel anxiously debates whether the space of the nation doubles as a ghetto that protects *and* traps, and whether the sovereignty of some inevitably means the assimilation of others.

Delivering the same historical event in no less than three different versions, *Kishinev* leaves no doubt that narrating the nation requires a potentially unlimited imagination. The first three chapters provide a detailed account of the British offer to the Zionist Congress, and are followed by the story of the Jewish settler Isaac Wilder, who acts on the British proposal and recreates the memory of Kishinev in a modest settlement on the Kenyan plains (36-95). Told by his grandson, the homage of a faithful relative sets the stage for Isaac’s own testimonial which imagines the establishment of a Jewish National Home in (post-) colonial Kenya (99-124). In the final chapter, the grandson Benjamin will embrace the ancestral vision and claim the Kenyan Kishinev as an act of collective triumph rather than the story of personal perseverance. What emerges in these conflicting and overlapping accounts is a narrative hybrid, cognizant of its fictionality and vested interests. But

⁷ See also Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*.

the collective memory of Isaac and Benjamin Wilder also justifies nationalist aspirations as historical destiny and claims the nation in the metaphoric texture of kinship and love.⁸ Bound by memory and loyalty, the history of the Jewish National Home in Kenya as imagined by the two homodiegetic narrators is devoted to the needs of the patrilineage, and it is this emphasis on natural ties rather than chosen affinity that will prove unsettling for the Nandi wives of Benjamin and his father.

Despite their desire for a National Home, the narrators attempt to avoid the exclusionary rhetoric of the *terra nullius* that enables the settler to claim a land not “owned” before his arrival (Mbembe *Postcolony* 183). Instead, Benjamin and Isaac acknowledge the presence of other civilizations in the disputed territory, populations such as the Nandi, with whom the Jewish settlers will eventually intermarry, and the Sirikwa, the original but now vanished inhabitants of the land. Amazed by the stone kraals of the Sirikwa, Benjamin Wilder wonders whether the soundly built structures were used to protect cattle or as defensive forts against enemies (8). For Benjamin, they illustrate the ambivalence of the space of the nation and, thus, even as he declares his belonging to the Kenyan Jewish community, he worries that he “might feel trapped, as so many were trapped in ghettos and ovens, if I had to duck through the low entry passage of a Sirikwa hole” (95). Though Isaac’s “conquest” of the Kenyan plains satisfies the longing for a politically sovereign nation, it cannot still the fear that such clearly visible boundaries will create another ghetto.⁹ Throughout the narrative, Benjamin will have to consider that as an enclave within a colony, the Jewish National Home can ill afford to be exclusive (111), that “enclave turns easily into ghetto” (29), and that even the ghetto of hybridity protects as much as it traps (90). For those with a distinct memory of confined quarters, the fear remains that a space of belonging might turn into a site of enclosure. If the ambivalent semantics of ghetto trouble the nation’s claim to territorial integrity, then Benjamin’s recollections of Jewish history return, again and again, to the ghetto as a place produced by religious discrimination.

From an early age, Benjamin is aware that “Jews were the people of remembrance” (73), but rather than the barely observed religious rituals, it is the external pressures on Jewish life which shape his memory and identity. For the child, the collective experience of persecution is first experienced in the photograph of his aunt Rachel. In search of her Jewish roots in Europe, Rachel departs from Kishinev in the early 1930s, armed only with old addresses and half-remembered Yiddish phrases. Her nostalgic longing to decipher the sepia photographs and unintelligible letters of the past delivers her into the modernity of a bureaucratically organized genocide. The frail

⁸ See Anderson on the significance of kinship and love in the rhetorical construction of the nation. Also relevant are his remarks on the role of history in consolidating national identity, in particular the narrative retrieval of “the voices of the past” that represent the nation’s lineage and selective memory (197).

⁹ For a discussion of human survival in enclosed spaces, see Ilieva’s review of *A Farm Called Kishinev*.

figure of a young girl turns into a sign of enduring grief, and ensures that the Kenyan Kishinev not only serves as a site of memory for the 1903 pogrom, but also resonates with the atrocities of the Holocaust. The peripheral character of Rosa Levine, a middle-aged woman who seeks refuge in Kenya “since the UK visa quota was full” (69), performs a similar narrative function in her continuous grief for lost lives and the profound sadness with which she contemplates an unimaginable crime (129). Gendered figures of permanent sorrow, Rachel Wilder and Rosa Levine evoke the Holocaust as a palpable presence of collective victimization, and therefore serve an instrumental role in what Bauman has called the social production of guilt and innocence. The ghostly figures of Rosa and Rachel work towards a sense of hereditary victimhood, an imagined ancestry “acting through the collective production of memory and through individual acts of self-enlisting and self-identification,” so that signs of future hostility can affirm a familiar identity (Bauman *Holocaust* 238). The memory of persecution gestures towards the “aristocracy of victimhood” and an implicit subtext of celebratory survival that morally legitimizes the Jewish presence in (post-)colonial space. It might help to explain Benjamin’s confidence in a marginalized identity and his insistence that “[i]f anyone makes a remark about my hair being too curly I tell them it’s because I am one of the Chosen people” (77). The imposed narrative of race as a sign of undesirable otherness thus encounters the defiant narrative of religion as a sign of privileged knowledge.

The notion of hereditary victimhood provides a powerful rationale for the nationalist aspirations of the Jewish community in Kenya. Even in the Kenyan colony, Jewishness signifies on “an undesirable difference” in physical appearance, religious practice and political interests, and is subject to interminable disputes over “what degree of civilization counted as ‘white’” (47). Yet the same register of difference can also be employed to assert the cultural authority derived from a history of violence. And thus, the British colonialists feel obligated to accept Jews as Europeans since “[w]hat else, with such a history, could they possibly be?” (48). In the rhetorical construction of “race”, when ethnicity and class, nation and religion easily translate into immutable difference, the definition of “Jewishness” has proven particularly vulnerable to shifting political agendas. In the novel, however, the racialization of religious difference is not only mobilized in the service of organized violence but, ironically, also operates as a source of political capital. This ambivalence enables Isaac and Benjamin Wilder to simultaneously distance *and* align themselves with the colonial government, to insist that “[w]e were not much used to this being called white. It hardly fits with the other adjectives commonly applied to us” (112), and still aspire to the bourgeois dream of success. It is a dream best exemplified in the reinvention of the immigrant in the image of the gentleman (48), in Isaac’s longing for “a lady of refinement” (45), and in the pride with which he strives to position himself within the “framework of British society—post office, groceries, newspapers, train tickets, agricultural shows” (42).

While the fictional identity of “Tutsi” proves deadly in Owuor’s “Weight of Whispers,” unstable and shifting affiliations in *Kishinev* provide the passport to survival. Benjamin’s hybrid ethnicity complicates his location in the ambiguous narratives of race and nation. For him, “mixture of blood was as much an asset as a peculiarity [since] it helped you to distance yourself from factions” and exploit the insecurity of others unsure of “where you would position yourself” (89). His embrace of the antithetical desires for diasporic routes and national roots leaves open the possibility of both the “wandering devotee and the local patriot” (Anderson 149). Yet even as multiple identifications supply welcome escape routes for Benjamin, the politics of gender and race in the colony, and in the Jewish community in particular, transform multipositionality from an asset for men into a liability for women. In the experience of Benjamin’s mother Sophie, the Jewish National Home turns into a space of enclosure that traps rather than protects, an agent of patriarchal authority and forced assimilation that leaves her without social support. The utopia of multiple belongings thus devolves into the dystopia of permanent unbelonging when the nation reproduces its distinctly patriarchal image.

Seemingly unlimited in its historical imagination, *Kishinev* surprises through its inability to imagine female characters other than as iconic signifiers of exile and mourning. Introduced in various stages of vulnerability and transition, when their imminent arrival in Kenya calls for male protection (Sarah, 46), when their departure for Europe signals certain death (Rachel, 61), or when an “expected daughter is expelled in premature pain and blood” (Sophie, 62), the novel’s female characters fade away even before they fully appear. Though acutely missed when absent, they are barely perceivable when present, and their desire for roots in Europe is as fatal as their inability to find a place of belonging in Kenya. Benjamin’s Nandi mother reinvents herself repeatedly, first in the image of colonial Christianity then of Jewish culture, only to be left without a viable community. Sophie’s early departure from the narrative signifies on a limited (even if alternative) national imagination, in which the politics of race and gender restrict a woman’s spatial and social mobility. In a Jewish community considered “white” in colonial Kenya, Sophie’s social position must remain precarious. Though she is willing to accept the rules of Judaism, her Jewish neighbors are ill at ease with the unorthodox composition of the Wilder household (68). Even after her husband advances to the position of sole proprietor of Kishinev, Sophie remains painfully separated from the “expected world[s]” of the Nandi and the Christian community, since “by converting she had cut herself off from the friendships the other women made in church” (71). Forced to move “outside the network of authority and obligation” (71), her conversion to Judaism becomes the sign of both assimilation and permanent displacement. Religious compliance and cultural conformity fail to balance the visible sign of racial difference, and thus Sophie is obligated to stay away from official functions, “from school speech days and agricultural shows” (78). In the end, her son can only

observe with sadness the passing of a mother who will be mourned by Jewish and Christian communities with “nothing to say to one another” (78). Later, Sophie’s story will find an uncanny repetition in Benjamin’s short marriage to a woman of Nandi and British heritage. Tragic figures of loss and death, of the physical violence of genocide and the epistemic violence of conversion, the female characters in *Kishinev* demonstrate the vulnerability of women under the influence of patriarchal politics.

If Nandi wives are marginalized in Benjamin’s account of Wilder family history, then the practice of exclusion intensifies in Isaac’s “alternative history” of a Jewish National Home. Though the settlers aspire to maintain friendly relations with their European and Nandi neighbors, the acceptance of Jewish sovereignty is the *sine qua non* for any attempt at inclusion: “We took the offered territory and made our own allocations within it. We did not entirely exclude the Nandi or the other Europeans—we did not want to create another ghetto for ourselves—so long as they conformed to our rules” (114). Once the spiritual commonalities with the Nandi are interpreted as “a miraculous sign of common cause” (110), mass conversion to Judaism seems a desirable option for the emerging nation. In part to avoid the aggressive competition of Christian missionaries and in part because “as an enclave within a colony we knew we could not be exclusive” (111), the narrators insist on the re-invention of Judaism as a universal religion. The possibility of conversion shifts the notion of “God’s chosen people” from a privileged covenant to the explicit desire for imperial reproduction. As a political state and a universal religion, the Jewish National Home in Kenya aims to naturalize the chosen affiliation of those striving for citizenship by insisting on their assimilation.¹⁰ In the “slippage between the nation as a political community bound by citizenship and as an ethnic or racial community bound by language and descent” (Weitz 29), the National Home predictably re-enacts the contradictions of the colonial enterprise, whose promise of “civilizational progress” remained tightly controlled by the imperatives of political subjugation and cultural assimilation.

Eventually, Benjamin will have to acknowledge that the alternative national history he is envisioning relies on the need to protect “our most general beliefs and the ethics of our social system” (130), and that, in its distinct needs for borders and surveillance, the National Home indeed has to consider itself an enclave (131). As the nation oscillates between the seemingly contradictory impulses of expansion and ghettoization, it claims the right to punish those who defy official rules. When, seemingly without irony, Benjamin remarks that in the defense against the spread of HIV “our people are routinely screened and wear warning badges if they are found to be infected” (134), the nation has fully reclaimed its authority to police the “body politic.”¹¹ The visible marking of a diseased and hence undesirable

¹⁰ On assimilation as the state’s war against ambivalence, as a unidirectional process aimed at maintaining the identity of the assimilating body, see Bauman, “Modernity and Ambivalence” and *Modernity and Ambivalence*.

¹¹ See Bauman on the metaphor of modern culture as a garden culture, committed to

population echoes the historical ghettoization of those singled out to wear the Star of David. Segregation is thus, yet again, justified in the name of political and medical hygiene. Imagined within the paradigm of the nation, even the alternative history of a continually displaced population insists on the need to protect “national health.” Once the National Home ceases to be in narrative transit, it boldly claims the prerogatives of political sovereignty, from the monopoly on violence to the social production of moral indifference. The logic of survival justifies the logic of eviction when those most vulnerable are marked with the sign of deficiency, set aside as a different category and thus removed from the ethical responsibility of their fellow citizens (Bauman *Holocaust* 191).

It is not without irony that those who, throughout history, have often been considered unwanted strangers here re-invent themselves as agents of assimilation intent on preserving (and reproducing) the Jewish patrilineage.¹² Ultimately, the nation cannot surrender the cultural distinctiveness that legitimizes its claim to political existence. Even as a potential vehicle for freedom, national (and domestic) homes are always also a force of discipline (Weitz 44). *Kishinev* baffles the reader with the poignant ambivalence of its excess and lack of imagination, with its simultaneous embrace of “the shreds and patches of cultural signification” and its final return to pedagogical coherence (Bhabha 294). Critical of its own desires, mindful of the fictionality of nationhood, the novel acknowledges the presence of a diasporic elsewhere, yet is unable to imagine Jewish and Nandi equality for fear of undermining the rights of the Jewish National Home. Instead, the narrative transforms settlers into natives and natives into strangers, while translating the imperative of national self-production into a program of social engineering that perceives the sovereignty of the other as a threat to one’s own (Bauman *Holocaust* 173). Exhausted by seemingly endless narrative possibilities, *Kishinev* finally settles for the success of the National Home. In its loyalty to the vision of the father, the novel aims to protect the memory of persecution even if it has to trap vulnerable wives, and thus re-enacts the ambiguity of the ghetto it has feared all along.

“If the Nazi Holocaust was testimony to the crisis of the nation-state in Europe, the Rwandan genocide is testimony to the crisis of citizenship in postcolonial Africa” (Mamdani *Victims* 39). And if *Kishinev* reveals the construction of settlers and natives and their differential access to power, then Owuor’s story insists on deconstructing political identities which enable the state-sponsored persecution of “foreigners.” The narrative’s main protagonist, “a Tutsi of noble ancestry” by the name of Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane, escapes from the Rwandan genocide only to face persistent

the design of an opportune social order from which “harmful effects” have been eliminated. At worst, such aspirations might serve to rationalize genocidal violence against “undesirable groups” as political and medical hygiene (*Holocaust* 70-71). See also Weitz on the racialist foundations of anti-Semitism which perceived of Jews as a threat to the purity of the racial group (46-47).

¹² See Laqueur on the anti-Semitic claim of Jews as “unassimilable” strangers (59).

discrimination in Kenya. Progressively alienated from a fictional identity fashioned in the colonial discourses of race and ethnicity, the prince-turned-beggar has to contend with his new and undesirable status of refugee, with the burden of perpetual displacement and the terror of denied privilege.¹³ Similar to the plot of Macgoye's novel, the atrocities the short story evokes take place in the "narrative off." Yet both narratives succeed in exploring the enabling conditions of genocide: the historical formation of racialized identities, the capacity of the modern state to design a social order desirable to those in power, and the unrelenting logic with which private and public authority are exercised against vulnerable populations.

Leaving Rwanda with an entourage of female dependents, Kuseremane casually claims the right to purchase "the last seats on the last plane" out of a country descending into organized chaos. Europe is the final destination for the privileged travelers belonging to a carefully groomed elite, who tolerate Kenya only as a temporary refuge. "Fortunately," the prince proclaims, "we were in transit. Soon, we would be in Europe, among friends" (14). Defined by "a self-conscious racialized elitism" (Mamdani *Victims* 89), Kuseremane's subjectivity testifies to the divisive politics of colonialism and its lasting impact on the construction of self and other "that partially enabled the 1994 genocide" (Partington 112). The tall man, whose Tutsi aristocracy is physically inscribed in the stereotyped features of his body, seems "[to have] swallowed wholesale the venom that was the Hamitic hypothesis" (Mamdani *Victims* 89) when he exploits a collective identity coded in colonial terms of racial superiority.

For Kuseremane, the comforts promised by a privileged identity need to be vigorously defended. Throughout his sojourn in the Kenyan exile, he anxiously reiterates the paradigms defining his existence: he is a member of a divine-right royalty who at birth was "recognized by the priests as a man and a prince;" he is a former senior diplomat; he is a successful neocolonial elite partner in both a banking and gemstone business, he is a well-educated "universal citizen" with a Ph.D. in diplomacy and a Masters in Geophysics (Partington 113). Kuseremane cannot comprehend the possibility of an existence outside the circulating narratives of racialized ethnicity. Yet, soon after his escape from Rwanda, the aristocrat-turned-victim will be confronted with the "weight of whispers" insisting on his responsibility for the genocide. But if he is a member of the Rwandan Tutsi monarchy that "was abolished just prior to the country's independence," how could he have been implicated in the genocide? Partington rightfully argues that such inconsistencies foreground the fictionality of the character and problematize any attempt at a sympathetic reading of his inevitable slide from power. While the untenability of Kuseremane's myth of identity deconstructs the elitist categories on which the "enforced and colonially-vulgar discourses of antagonistic Hutu/Tutsi racial identity" are predicated (Partington 117), it simultaneously demonstrates the

¹³ For a persuasive reading of the dynamics of race and genocide in the short story, see Partington, "Making Us Make Some Sense of Genocide"; see also Steel, "Displacement and Diaspora."

impact of such identity discourses on the construction of self and other and their reliance on fears of “foreign” racial oppression which were so efficiently disseminated through the Rwandan mass media.

Authored by German and Belgian colonialists, the fiction of the foreign origin of the Tutsi could be skillfully exploited in the 1990s to evoke the fear of a return to “feudal servitude” and insist on the Tutsis’ “repatriation” to Ethiopia. Colonial policies racialized previously existing political identities and translated them into the volatile distinction between indigenous “native” and alien “settler.” Belgian colonialism thus relied on the Hamitic hypothesis to support the myth that those in power in the nineteenth century Rwandan kingdom, the “Tutsi”, were in fact foreigners with Caucasoid racial origins in Ethiopia who had successfully established their “racial superiority” over the local “Hutu” population. In the racial coding of “Tutsi” and “Hutu”, a superior group of (white-like) Hamitic peoples triumphed over an inferior race of Bantu negroids.¹⁴ Only briefly puzzled by the “civilizational progress” of a well-functioning Rwandan kingdom, the European colonizers had discovered an explanation preserving the Victorian myth of darkest Africa. As racial identity was visibly documented in identity cards issued since the 1930s, and power allocated on the basis of racial privilege, Tutsi administrators became the official face of colonial oppression. To the dynamics of power, Belgian colonialism had added the explosive politics of race and indigeneity.

Under the increasing pressure of the United Nations, the Belgian colonial state was forced to reconsider its unilateral backing of the Tutsi elite after the Second World War, and shifted its support to the emerging Hutu middle class. The Belgian shift from Tutsi to Hutu support successfully deflected “the basis of late colonial conflict from class (in which case the Belgians would have been seen as equally guilty) into race [sic], in this one move turning the racialised Tutsi from ally to enemy.”¹⁵ As Rwanda transformed from a Tutsi-dominated colonial administration into a postcolonial republic founded on Hutu rule, “race thinking that had once hardened identity categories and benefited the Tutsi minority now gave rise to ethnic nationalism. Rwanda’s new Hutu leaders claimed independence in the name of the previously oppressed Hutu majority” (Strauss 22). In the midst of a deepening political crisis in the 1990s, the Habyarimana administration found it opportune to divert accusations of neo-colonial elitism and regional divisions among the Hutu onto issues of race.¹⁶ An effectively

¹⁴ See Mamdani on the historical mutations of the Hamitic hypothesis (*Victims* 79-87).

¹⁵ Kamukama, quoted in Partington (116).

¹⁶ Between 1990 and 1994, Rwanda experienced a severe political crisis as both the government and the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) prepared for war. Increased RPF attacks from October 1990 to 1993 had led to the negotiation of a peace accord that signaled the end of one-party rule. Challenged by political opponents inside and outside the country, the government feared the political ramifications of a peace treaty granting major concession to the rebels while promising multi-party elections and the presence of an international peace-keeping force. Hutu extremists responded to this political threat with the creation of civilian defense programs, the funding and

mobilized program of ethnic nationalism denied the linguistic and cultural commonalities of Hutu and Tutsi, and instead insisted on a distinctive Hutu identity (and a history of victimization) to legitimize the exclusionary policies of the Rwandan nation-state and its definition of citizenship in ethnic and territorial terms. As a consequence, “an individual’s enjoyment of civil rights [depended] on his appurtenance to an ethnic group or locality” (Mbembe “Edge” 280). The discourse of Tutsi racial privilege had thus shifted to the imperative of racial exclusion, which encouraged the forceful eviction of “strangers” whose presence could only be perceived as a threat to national sovereignty. Securely constructed within the rhetoric of violence and autochthony, the victim who was also the enemy was blamed for the crisis of the postcolonial nation.¹⁷ And thus the seemingly contradictory characterization of Kuseremane as victim and *genocidaire* operates within the logic of organized violence and the mutual fear of victimhood through which today’s victims become tomorrow’s killers.

In exile, Kuseremane’s deliberately built ghetto of racial privilege soon turns into the ghetto forcefully imposed on stateless refugees. His slide from power proceeds quickly after his arrival in Kenya. Well-rehearsed securities disintegrate when he is faced with the slipperiness of a foreign tongue, the loss of authority and the gradual depletion of funds. The contradictions of an unstable, delusional identity emerge poignantly when the former bank president proves unable to convert foreign currency; when the erstwhile prince no longer solicits respect from the owner of a pawnshop, but only the epithet *takataka*, rubbish; and when the son and brother fails to protect his female dependents. The steep social decline finds its spatial equivalent in the family’s undignified departure from the comforts of the Nairobi Hilton to the squalor of River Road, the shamed destination of the urban dispossessed. As the familiar world disappears, the body and its psychological defenses break down amidst the anxious reiteration that “[t]he Kuseremanes are not refugees. They are visitors, tourists, people in transit, universal citizens with an affinity ... well... to Europe” (16). Though Europe has closed its doors to “the brother sovereigns in exile,” Kuseremane refuses to exchange the narrative of privilege for the disenfranchised status of the refugee. Transit speaks of choice; permanent displacement signals the ghettoization of the powerless.

In its exploration of the metaphorical texture of wilderness, the short story debunks the myth of a carefully regulated and morally responsible modern society. While the commodified wilderness of exotic animals has been effectively domesticated for human consumption (22), real danger lurks in the wilderness of a scavenging humanity. Policemen and immigration officers, UN staffers and embassy personnel, seem ready to pounce on their unsuspecting

training of youth militia, and with an increasingly defensive nationalism that framed the Tutsi as the common enemy (Strauss 153-200).

¹⁷ Consider, for example, the broadcasts aired on state radio which instructed all Rwandans to unite against a common enemy since “[i]t’s the enemy who wants to reinstate the former feudal monarchy” (Strauss 50).

victims. Though the physical wilderness in *Kishinev* can be tamed by acts of conquest, the allegorical wilderness of “Whispers” is dominated by the inhuman landscape of modern institutions. In Owuor’s narrative, the violence generated by bureaucratic efficiency and the state’s monopoly on power appears strikingly similar to the violence resulting from the performance of public functions for private ends that testifies to significant shifts in power within the postcolonial nation (Mbembe *Postcolony* 78). Regardless of whether it is deployed in support of state-mandated policies or as a vehicle for personal profit, the administrative apparatus of various national and international organizations repeatedly fails those who seek out its assistance.

That the rules of bureaucratic culture allow for indifference to human despair is demonstrated in Kuseremane’s futile attempt to secure an entry visa for the United States. At the American embassy in Nairobi, the prince encounters an employee who, in her insistence that he lacks the necessary documents to have his case processed, relies on the technical language of standardized procedures to rationalize her swift denial of his request. Through the routine performance of authorized actions, human beings are reduced to manageable objects and are dehumanized in the name of procedural efficiency. Officially approved indifference, however, can easily turn into hostility when such “manageable objects” resist the implementation of bureaucratic routine (Bauman *Holocaust* 17). As the prince pleads his case, the employee’s call—“Next!”—signals the finality with which his request has been denied (17). Even the immigration officer to whom the prince presents his accomplished résumé reminds Kuseremane that the privilege of education has been replaced by the impotence of poverty and statelessness: “Ati Ph.D. Ph.D. gani? Wewe refugee, bwana!” (22).¹⁸ Citing the section of the immigration charter which obligates him to report illegal aliens to the police, the officer extracts an exorbitant bribe from his baffled victim. Money buys protection; public office ensures that the transfer of resources now follows its own logic of allocation and violence. Given the educational system in colonial Rwanda, with its distinction between a “superior” French education reserved for Tutsi and an “inferior” Kiswahili curriculum for those considered Hutu, it is only fitting that the former prince has to comprehend his new status “in the language of servants.”¹⁹ When Kuseremane is later arrested by the police for failing to produce either the sign of arbitrary order (a valid ID) or of organized disorder (bribe), his captors delight in tormenting him in the caricatured language of reason and justice. Each time they deprive him of one of his possessions (the sacred ring, the snakeskin wallet, the only photograph of his family), the bribe is rationalized in well rehearsed legal codes: extortion translates into “evidence”, while “resisting arrest” and “attempted escape” justify random violence. Official models of sovereignty and violence here deliver welcome examples for the privatized exercise of power and authority.

¹⁸ “Listen, what Ph.D.? You are a refugee, man!”

¹⁹ See Mamdani (*Victims* 89) and “A Brief History of Genocide” (44).

The representation of the United Nations Refugee Agency in the short story presents by far the most disturbing testimony to the vulnerability of displaced populations and the role of international organizations in this new culture of immunity (Mbembe, *Postcolony* 82). Not only does the presence of the UNHCR further diminish the sovereignty of the Kenyan state, but its humanitarian mission is rendered absurd, as long as international help follows the procedures of the death camp and individual officials pawn refugees for the purpose of extracting bribes and sexual favors.²⁰ Apparently, the walk is short from Fanon's native village to the ghetto and on to the refugee camp. Once inside the United Nations compound, the Kuseremanes are documented and classified, photographed and registered, stamped on the wrist in a gesture eerily reminiscent of concentration camps (23). Separated into the undesirable and the desirable, only the latter are subjected to a medical examination that destines them as prey for future sexual assault: "Annals of war decree that conquest of landscapes is incomplete unless the vanquished's women are 'taken.' Where war is crudest, the women are discarded, afterwards for their men to find" (29). For Lune, Kuseremane's fiancée, the threat of rape is only bearable when thought of as the cooperation necessary to ensure survival; once "discussed with family, it is not a question of being forced," she explains to a disbelieving prince, who feels "taunted for [his] ineffectuality by this woman who would be [his] wife" (29). Practicing familiar ballerina steps in front of the mirror, she attempts to distance herself from her own violation by performing a more opportune role. Though her compliance will win Lune the coveted passage to Canada, the logic of survival motivating her behavior primarily serves the interest of those who formulate the rules of exploitation.

Beaten by a fiancé who can only express his impotence in acts of domestic violence, Lune fares only marginally better than Kuseremane. As the familiar narrative of Tutsi aristocracy slowly disintegrates, the body of privilege defined by the consumption of expensive food and designer clothes dissolves into an undesirable body, malnourished and subjected to physical violence. When the Kuseremanes accept that "the first lesson of exile [is] camouflage" (28), they force themselves to believe that refugees have no other choice than to participate in their own violation. To survive in the domesticated wilderness of human civilization does require to "turn [oneself] into a log" (27). Ironically, it is an act of "thingification" that simultaneously participates in the rationality of survival, claiming surrender to the perpetrator's logic as a conscious choice, *and* the phenomenology of death through which negated subjects accept their reduction to nothingness.²¹ Once the Kuseremanes resign themselves to a state of perpetual transit, their hopes and frustrations are visibly

²⁰ On the impact of international humanitarian organizations on state sovereignty, see Mbembe ("At the Edge" 278).

²¹ On the logic of survival, see Bauman (*Holocaust* 129); on the individual's participation in the phenomenology of death and the reduction of the "native" to a thing, see Mbembe (*Postcolony* 173-211).

inscribed into their migrations through Nairobi's urban landscape. From the luxury of the Hilton Hotel, they move to the squalor of River Road and, eventually, to Hurlingham, a neighborhood known for its population of Ethiopian refugees. When hope for forward movement has been lost, the anxiously repeated refrain "soon [help will arrive]," and the call "next [in line]," signify on the collapse of time into the circularity of movement. Under the "combined impact of war, the collapse of state order, and the ensuing forced migrations" (Mbembe "Edge" 270), the numbers of displaced people and the centers of displacement steadily increase:

[W]hat was supposed to be an exception becomes routine and the rule within an organization of space that tends to become permanent. In these human concentrations with an extraterritorial status, veritable imaginary nations henceforth live [and generate] new forms of socialization. (270)

But the Kuseremanes' quest for meaningful patterns only produces a steady repetition of unreturned phone calls, abusive state agents and persistent whispers of guilt. Eventually, the former prince will surrender to a landscape of death, faithfully watching over the graves of his mother and sister, and "[w]aiting for the return of a name set ablaze when fire made dust out of two presidents' bodies..." (36). Inevitably, the crisis of citizenship and the changing political configurations of power in the Great Lakes region contribute to the simultaneous dissolution of existing territorial frameworks and the proliferation of internal borders. "[W]hether imaginary, symbolic, or a cover for economic or political struggles," these internal borders insist on the prerogative of indigeneity and the identification with particular localities and "give rise to exclusionary practices, 'identity closure,' and persecution, which, as seen, can easily lead to pogroms, even genocide" (Mbembe *Postcolony* 87).

Owuor's and Macgoye's narratives deliver powerful critiques of the modern nation-state, its desire for a politically opportune order, its monopoly on violence, and its construction of privileged and disenfranchised categories of identity. But the texts also do not overlook the disastrous effects that new forms of privatized government and violence have on unsuspecting civilians. Bureaucratic efficiency appears to be as morally indifferent to the plight of vulnerable social groups as bureaucratic corruption is; state-sponsored programs narrow the criteria for citizenship and generate new struggles for power and resources; and internal borders endlessly proliferate when displaced populations are confined to refugee camps. Based on fictions of race and ethnicity, identities are subjected to constant and extensive political manipulation, so that even Jewish settlers can position themselves as natives while Tutsi citizens are reduced to foreign intruders. Colonial and fascist discourses of race provide a powerful rhetorical medium which can be exploited either for political capital or to discriminate against "undesirable" populations. For those seduced by the prospect of power and citizenship, the readiness to assimilate to official identity discourses will result in certain death. For Nandi wives adapting to Jewish culture and religion, and for a prince

embracing the fiction of race before accepting the facelessness of the refugee, the willingness “to turn [themselves] into a log” only leads to an obliterated existence.

Kishinev eventually surrenders its competing narratives to the hope for a National Home. Though self-consciously gesturing towards the dystopic qualities of narrating the nation, the novel cannot quite muster the strength to explore the dilemmas of permanently uprooted wives. Only for a short time does the experience of statelessness unite both Jews and Nandi in their struggle to escape from death in enclosed spaces. Eventually though, the attempt at a critical dialogue surrenders to the monologic imperative of cultural assimilation.²² Rather than compromise, “Whispers” proves unrelenting in its attack on identity categories that lead to fratricidal violence, and emphasizes the unreliability of a narrator “whose voice dissolves into the text much as his fictional body dissolves into the squalor of Nairobi” (Partington 120). Both narratives deconstruct the semiotic texture of the nation when they portray protagonists, identities and institutions in various stages of transit, and thus challenge the reader to participate in the construction of meaning.²³ Between the Tutsi aristocrat and his sovereign drive to mastery and the vulnerable refugee complicit in her own dehumanization, indeed, “[t]here must be another way to live” (Owuor 34).

As the texts examine the enabling conditions of genocidal violence, they question the ethics of being human. Here, the novel and short story join Mbembe’s and Bauman’s search for alternatives to the violent modernities they so eloquently deconstruct. Writing across different cultural and disciplinary locations, both scholars turn to the Jewish philosopher Levinas for an understanding of intersubjective encounters not framed by the Hegelian master-slave allegory and the assertion of unilateral sovereignty over the other. For Bauman, Levinas offers a viable model for reclaiming moral commitment as the fundamental paradigm of human relations. Being with the other is here not premised on contractual obligations or the expectation of benefit, but on the notion of mutual responsibility. Morally responsible conduct might thus, on occasion, require resistance to official norms and powers as “[it] has to count on its pristine source: the essential human responsibility for the Other” (*Holocaust* 199). If the essence of freedom is being-for-the-other, if it is my duty to account for the life and death of the other as my own, wonders Mbembe, then how does this ethical practice of freedom relate to the stranger and the enemy, especially in situations where political freedom appears to be premised on the killing of one’s adversary? With reference to South Africa’s transition to democracy and efforts at racial reconciliation, he argues that “it is possible to re-imagine a political community, the legitimacy

²² See Mbembe’s “Faces of Freedom” for a reading emphasizing the commonalities of Jewish and black history. By contrast, Gilroy criticizes “the missing dialogue” between Jewish and black writers and in particular Bauman’s notion of the stranger (213).

²³ See Partington’s reading of “Whispers” as generating a “responsible indeterminacy” that demands the reader’s involvement (120).

of which does not need to reside in the right to demand from its members the readiness to die, or unhesitatingly to kill one's enemies either in the name of freedom or of survival" ("Freedom" 298).

In their concern with the failure of states, communities and individuals to care for other human beings, the narratives struggle, not always successfully, for a different moral framework. By foregrounding the fictionality of "National Home" or "Tutsi", they are able to acknowledge dystopian violence without losing hope for the possibility of utopian communities in which the face of the other inspires concern, not indifference or violence. The round table envisioned in the "Indépendance Cha Cha Cha"—"L'indépendance, ils l'ont obtenue/La table ronde, ils l'ont gagnée..."—as the call for all citizens to negotiate their differences, has not entirely lost its relevance. This time, though, we can no longer respond with the same unbridled optimism to the cheerful tune. Too often we have witnessed how the space of protection turns into a site of exclusion.

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