

We Did Not Ask To Be Colonized:
Legacies of Colonial Trauma in 21st Century African Fiction

An honors thesis for the Department of English

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For the Children of Agohoza-Shalom

[I carry your hearts in my heart]

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Introduction

Through the work of countless lifetimes it has become generally accepted that the period of European Imperialism during the 19th to the 20th century was not particularly beneficial to those who were colonized.¹ However, the echoes from this era still reverberate in the minds of previously colonized peoples today. The eras of conquest and colonization were violent, paradigm shattering times for most of the societies that were appropriated, and the collective traumas experienced by these people have persisted for generations. How is it that Africans express this traumatic memory today in the 21st century?

The first thing visitors see when they walk into the Genocide Memorial Center in Kigali, Rwanda is a towering inscription that reads, “We did not ask to be colonized.” It is striking that this is where Rwandans choose to begin their discussion of the genocide. This centering of causation in the past can at first appear like a denial of responsibility, but it is actually an exercise in coming to terms with a violent distant past that had very real consequences in the recent past. This struggle to understand an immensely dynamic and violent century and a half is featured in literature from across the African Continent.

While the experience of conquest and colonialism was as varied as the people who experienced it, there are certain aspects of the articulated colonial state that were more or less universal. First, colonialism inherently changed the local power structures. In Nigeria, the British policy of indirect rule served to alienate indigenous leaders from

¹ The history of African and European interactions begins well before the 19th Century. There are documented accounts of these interactions as early as the 16th century. It is a complicated and dynamic past that must take into account the unique histories of African societies, Saharan trade routes, Indian Ocean/Swahili Coast trade routes, and the Atlantic slave trade. My focus on the 19th and 20th centuries is a way of focusing my discussion of Western Imperialism in Africa on the time that is most reflected in the novels this thesis studies. For further discussion of the long and dynamic history of Africa see John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

their subjects (Falola 110). In Somalia, the articulation of a centralized nation-state damaged traditional institutions and figures of authority (Doornbos 84). In Rwanda, the colonial strategy of “divide and rule” exasperated tensions between Hutu and Tutsi (Meredith 158). Second, the colonial system caused a dramatic revolution in indigenous economies as taxes forced people into an exploitative cash economy.² Third, Christianity was a major force for the colonial agenda, spreading ideas of “civilization” and “salvation.”³ These changes dramatically altered the structure of society and alienated indigenous people from both power structures and from their pre-colonial histories. The violence and disenfranchisement inherent in this alteration has left deep scars on the psyches of once colonized people.

The generations that actually experienced the brutality of conquest have all but passed on, but still the memories from this time persist in the present. Literature serves in many ways as a conduit for this historical trauma by acting as an undying testimony of trauma. Dori Laub explains the phenomenon of being traumatized by bearing witness to a person’s testimony of trauma in his article “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” In listening to someone’s testimony, the witness also becomes part of the trauma experience. The listener “comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (Laub 58). This witnessing can create an entirely new traumatic experience that allows the original trauma to live on in the secondary witness of the listener. This reoccurrence of trauma makes it difficult for societies to heal their historical wounds.

² For a more in depth discussion of the colonial economy see Toylin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *The History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

³ For more information on the missionary church in Africa see Olufemi Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010)

It is also difficult to process these collective experiences because the way we currently, clinically, understand trauma makes it difficult to apply the theory or science to a collective experience. Instead, psychological trauma is measured and codified based on which medically recognized “symptoms” appear in a certain time period after an event, which meets certain criteria, takes place. These symptoms are considered proof of a particular disorder, the most well known of which is PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). It is only after the manifestation of these symptoms that an event can officially be classified as traumatic. While our contemporary, clinical understanding of psychological trauma separates the individual from the collective, in reality the two experiences are irrevocably intertwined. Those events that are capable of creating traumatic fallout on a broad scale can only do so by inducing traumatic symptoms in many individuals within a collective whole. The ideas of collective and/or individual trauma can be viewed separately only briefly, but in order for either one to be fully understood the two must be used to compliment and nuance one another.

Literature allows people to transcend the rigidity of scientific proof and deal instead with the proof found in the human condition. It also gives authors an avenue to reconnect their distant past to their recent past and explore the connections between them. Fiction creates a space for authors to explore the complexities and connections of a collective traumatic past and begin to move forward. African authors in the 21st century are coming to terms with their divorce from history and beginning to reclaim the things that lie on the other side of the gulf of the 19th and 20th centuries. Understanding the ways that authors represent the colonial experience is vital in understanding where African literature is headed in the coming century. Just as Achebe, Ngugi, and Emecheta

gave voices to the colonized people of the 20th century, Adichie, Farah, and Pierce are emerging as voices for the people still dealing with the fallout from that colonization today. Just as the African authors of the 20th century revolutionized the novel with their subaltern voices, the authors of the 21st century remind us that the echoes of colonialism have done everything but fade. The traumatic fallout from what happened in the age of imperialism, as well as events that happened as a direct result, is the subject of choice of some of the most promising writers emerging on the Continent today.

This thesis interrogates how these writers attempt to unravel and reweave the series of interconnecting knots of experience lived by African people in the post-colonial world. *Knots, Purple Hibiscus, and Speak Rwanda* all deal with a range of experiences and traumatic fallouts, and all three begin to explore the process of healing. For even as the traumatic fallout persists in the present, there is a desire for the upheaval to be something of the past. These authors have pinpointed the experiences of colonialism as the origin of all the subsequent upheaval and so it is from those original experiences that the collective must begin to heal if the cycle of violence and turmoil is to be broken.

In my first chapter, I discuss the connections between traumatic events that take place in the public sphere, like the collapse of a State or the fighting that takes place in a civil war, and those events that take place in the private sphere, like violence against women. These private traumas are insidious, meaning they are not caused by a catastrophic event but, rather, stem from “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily wellbeing at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 100).⁴ Even as the fallout from these

⁴ For further discussion of insidious trauma see Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995)

events is more hidden than the fallout from events that take place in the public sphere, the ramifications for society are just as serious and widespread. The colonial influence in these events is faint, but by interrogating the parallels between the collective experience of the trauma of colonialism and the collective experience of insidious trauma, *Knots* exposes the way that colonial structures creep, vine-like, into the post-colonial, everyday lives of people.

My second chapter, continues to explore the overlapping of public and private spheres of trauma, yet while *Knots* deals with the connections between traumas in separate spheres, *Purple Hibiscus* explores a traumatic situations that spans both spheres at once: domestic abuse. The narrative explores the similarities between domestic abuse on the level of the nuclear family and colonial abuse on the level of the State. Arguably the most destructive aspect of both types of violence (save the actual loss of life that can result from both) is the repetitive nature of these types of violence. The second chapter investigates the consequences of the cycles of violence that *Purple Hibiscus* highlights, both when the cycle continues and when it is broken.

Finally, the third chapter deals with a traumatic event that takes place in the public sphere. Genocide is about the most cataclysmic traumatic event possible, which means the Rwandan genocide is the most accessible traumatic event discussed in this thesis. Unlike the hidden aspects of violence towards women or domestic abuse, the traumatic fallout from experiencing a genocide is much more obvious. Still, there are hidden aspects of the Rwandan genocide as well. Chapter three, on the novel *Speak Rwanda* explores the process of redefining the “victim.” Only in rewriting what a victim is to include those hidden victimizations can all those who are traumatized find healing.

Speak Rwandan deals with what it will take to heal the collective Rwanda, as opposed to just Hutu or Tutsi, because the whole cannot begin to heal and move forward until all its members are begun to heal as well.

Author's Note:

There is an inherent risk in writing about the experiences of African people (whether they are Somalis, Nigerians, Rwandans, Igbo, Tutsi, Hutu, or Hausa) as an American. I tried my best to be aware of my own lenses, as a woman, as a Caucasian, and as an American while writing this thesis. There is a long history of conflict between the West and the Subaltern, not just in terms of violent struggle, but also in the realm of academia. Even today, in the 21st century, the way that academia discusses trauma is inherently Western. This is something I tried to be aware of for the duration of researching and writing this thesis and it is something I hope you keep in mind while reading it. We must question our true motives and assumptions when we speak of the "human condition," for on the one hand such discourse can be used to free the oppressed by eradicating the dehumanization that allows for things like genocide. However, on the other hand it can also be an excuse to project a specific way of thinking and being onto another in such a way that the historically dominant system eclipses the value and beauty of another way of thinking and being.

Chapter One: Knots

The first sentence of Nuruddin Farah's novel *Knots* asks the questions "Who do you blame?" (Farah 1). This question is interrogated time and again in *Knots* because it is a question that gives us access to the multiple layers on which *Knots* operates. The conversation continues after this question with the first speaker insisting, "Surely someone is to blame?" but the conversation is fragmented, broken by long periods of flashback and description, and the subject remains unclear (Farah 2). When the other speaker finally answers the first question it is with another question, "Who?" the answer is "an unintelligible remark" (Farah 3). This exchange is indicative not only of the situation in Somalia but also of the different layers of trauma explored in *Knots*. The current political and security situation in Somalia is one of total state collapse, yet there is no single party to blame for this outcome. Just as the novel opens with an obtuse and vague exchange, in Somalia, it was a series of overlapping and often obscured events that resulted in the failure of the Somali state. The traumatic events that stem from these events are also infected with this ambiguity.

The colonial imprint on Somalia is not just a relic from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The wounds of colonialism were inflicted upon the collective psyche of the Somali people in three waves; first with the British and Italian occupation in the 1880s, then by the Cold War (United States and Soviet Union) during the 1960s and 1970s, and finally by the American coalition invasion in the early 1990s ("SOMALIA"). The country also suffered under the brutal dictatorship of Said Barre from 1969 to 1991 ("SOMALIA"). A great deal of blame could be legitimately placed on the Barre regime. Not only did Barre plant the seeds of mistrust that would escalate into full-scale clan warfare, but he also eroded the national infrastructure to the point where its only real

function was to redirect international aid into the pockets of members of his regime (Murphy 7). However, it would be irresponsible to ignore the way that the stress of the Barre regime interacted with pre-existing conditions due to colonialism, such as the division of the Somali people between five colonies or the destabilization of traditional agro-pastoral economy (“Somalia”).

According to the Peace Fund, Somalia’s failed status is marked by “a combination of widespread lawlessness, ineffective government, terrorism, insurgency, crime, [and] abysmal development” (Messner). Each of these problems exist independently of one another, have different dynamics requiring different remedies, and pose different types of threats (Menkhaus 16). These varied circumstances and threats lead to a variety of traumatic events, not just those that we first think of when we imagine a country torn by civil war and clan conflicts. It is these less obvious events that *Knots* explores because the novel is not looking at traumatic events themselves but instead at the fallout from these events. The novel is not so much about the fighting as it is about the effects of this fighting on the everyday lives of the people, both on an individual and societal level.

Yet, the novel looks not only at the tragic fallout of traumatic events, but how people and society begin to heal themselves. As *Knots* progresses we begin to see that the answer to the questions “who is to blame” might not actually be important. Instead, what truly matters is the way a person, or a people, pick up the pieces and carry on. Every layer of *Knots* is saturated with ways of thinking about trauma and its effects. From the lives of the individual characters to the actual structure of the book, *Knots* interrogates the different ways that trauma can be understood and experienced, and

illustrates the pervasive and insidious way that it stretches beyond war and into people's everyday lives.

Individual Trauma

The most obvious examples of trauma come from the individual characters. It is through their intersecting lives and experiences that the traumas of the collective Somali past are discussed and woven with the traumas experienced today by both the individual and the collective. The character that first builds the bridge between the experience of the individual and the collective is Bile.

Bile is removed from the reader, so removed that his trauma story is told through Cambara who hears it from Seamus. Just as the traumatic aftermath persists even with separation by time and space from the traumatic event so too does the trauma story persist even as the listener is separated from the subject. Just as the Somalis have few resources to tell their own stories, Seamus tells Bile's trauma story while Bile sleeps. Seamus says:

In addition to the childhood trauma of his half-brother murdering his dad, I trace his indisposition – here comes my psychobabble, if you can bear it – to his decades-long detention in inhumane conditions, the worst of it caused by his being kept in total isolation. You may not know that he spent years in isolation after being given a life sentence for opposing the tyrannical regime, whose misrule led to the civil war (Farah 326).

It is through Bile's life and trauma story that we learn of Somalia's traumatic experience. Bile serves to illustrate Somalia, separated in time from its moment of trauma yet still experiencing the symptoms of the traumatic fallout. His imprisonment is

an allegory for the experience of the entire Somali society. The tyrannical dictator that kept Bile imprisoned was none other than Said Barre, who held Somalia captive during his military regime. Barre came to power in a violent coup, mirrored by the murder of Bile's father. The inhuman conditions Bile was subjected to are symbolic of the intense poverty and famine inflicted on Somalia by the mismanagement of this regime.

In the same way that Bile's experience mirror those experienced by Somalia, so too are the consequences of his experience similar to the results of Somalia's past. Traumatized people will sometimes regress to a childlike state, which is what happens to Bile. When Cambara finds him after his collapse his condition is thus:

“He is lying on his side, dissipated, with no more energy to expend on getting up, his left hand under his head, the right hand balled into a fist and stretched forwards; both the back and the front of his trousers brown, most probably with his waste; one of his slippers off and the other half on. His right cheek is plastered with the thick deposit of dried yellow detritus probably stained with some partially digested food that the rest of his body not agreeing with, has rejected” (Farah 313).

Her primary reaction to this is to do “what she has done many times before as a mother” (Farah 313). While his soiled state, and especially Cambara's reaction, begins to paint the picture of a person who has regressed to an infantile state, it is his actions as she begins to clean him up that truly create the childlike personae, “he won't let go of her hand, no matter how gently she makes her intimations clear ... He holds it as a child might a teddy bear in his sleep.”

This regression points to the traumatic experience in Somalia's past not being a singular event. Instead the regression to an infantile state suggests that the trauma was two-fold. More recently in time, Somalia has "regressed" from the idea of a modern Nation-State back to a clan-based power structure. The explosion of violence then is not due to some inherent barbaric nature of Somali clans, but instead is an enactment of the self-destructive symptoms of the traumatic rule of Barre. Further back in time, there was the infantilization of the Somali people by the colonial power, be it British or Italian. Under colonialism, native people were stripped of the things that gave them full adult status, like the right to own land or to vote. Native Somalis were children in the eyes of the colonial powers and Bile's childhood trauma is an allusion to this era of perceived regression in Somali history.

Bile's trauma story creates the first link in *Knots*. Bile is the link between the individual and the collective. By constructing Bile as the individual stand-in for the country of Somalia, *Knots* explains the situation of Somalia today, the reversion to a pre-Nation-State. Here we can see the interrogation of who is to blame. The focus of Bile's trauma story is not on the war but on imprisonment. His traumatic fallout is not outwardly destructive, but self-destructive. While Bile certainly has the ability to connect us to the public sphere of civil war, he does not. Instead he connects individual experience to the collective experience and the traumas of today and of Barre's regime with the experiences of colonialism.

Colonial Echoes & Collective Trauma

The way that we currently, clinically understand trauma makes it difficult to apply the theory or science to a collective experience. *Knots* goes to great lengths to start with

the smallest building blocks of communal trauma, individuals who have experienced their own personal traumas, and use them to illustrate the trauma that has afflicted an entire society. As we have just seen, with Bile it is possible to illuminate the invisible experience of the whole through a careful construction of the trauma of an individual. Seamus's "psychobabble" about Bile's breakdown creates the parallels between Bile and Somalia and begins the process of interrogating a collective trauma. Bile's breakdown also begins to interrogate the traumatic events in Somalia's colonial past, but Cambara's experience of Bile's breakdown expands on the idea that it was more than just a bloody coup and a tyrannical dictator that traumatized Somalia.

Cambara decides she is bearing witness to the birth of a terrible ugliness ... The swelling of his face put her in mind of Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, playing the role of Kurtz, a highly disturbed former military officer gone madder and madder with insatiable greed who builds, neurotically, a castle of bones out of the brutal massacres of humans (Farah 316).

This allusion is two fold because the film *Apocalypse Now* is actually a retelling of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as evidenced by the main character Kurtz. It is a hopscotch back through time with *Apocalypse Now* representing the near past and *Heart of Darkness* the distant past. The traumatic events in Somalia's past begin to take on a sharper image. The castle of bones is a particularly striking when we think of the mass violence enacted during conquest. The colonial powers took little interest in Somalia until the construction of the Suez Canal, which was vital to the British Empire as a link to the Jewel in the Crown, India. *Knots* references the brutal, mad colonial officer, one of

the most vivid images in the colonial era imagination, to bring to mind the cost of conquest in human lives. That kind of violence leaves its mark on the collective memory, just like the image of a castle of bones is haunting.

This *Heart of Darkness* reference is just one of the implicit ways that *Knots* constructs the presence of a universal trauma. Much later in the novel there is a series of exchanges and events that takes place around a trestle table at one of the rehearsals for Cambara's play that truly paints the picture of colonialism as the grand traumatic event. Here is *Knots* speaking directly to the things that the colonialists left behind, not just physical structures like buildings, but entire systems that, like the trestle table which is "not very beautiful but ... has sufficient surface to spread [out] papers and notes," blend into Somalia today, and can occasionally, suddenly jump out as foreign (Farah 398).

"Have you any idea who brought this trestle table?"

"The white man," replies ScriptWoman.

Seamus she thinks. "When?"

"An hour before you returned from lunch."

"Did he leave a message?"

"Not with me."

"Do you know where he's gone?"

"I have no idea."

"I wish someone would know these things" (Farah 400).

The use of something as ubiquitous as a table as an allegory for colonialism begins to build the connection between the traumatic and the everyday. The table, utilitarian and covered in papers, represents the aspect of colonialism that did the most

damage: the bureaucracy. These bureaucratic colonial systems that the table represents are as everyday as a trestle table and permeate life in much the same way as all of these everyday traumas experienced by the characters in *Knots*. While the above exchange speaks to the confusion as to where these systems came from it is the following interaction that Cambara has with herself that implies the true harm that they have done:

It is only then that Cambara realizes that she does not know who brought the trestle table or how it got there. Inexplicably, she feels put out, as if she were a conservationist disturbed at the thought of being responsible for the unwitting introduction into the environment of some alien vegetation detrimental to the survival of the local species. ... she has been remiss in paying close attention to what is going on (Farah 399).

Cambara's realization that the answer to the "who" question is impossible is the culmination of the trauma and colonialism narrative. She doesn't know who brought the trestle table there, she doesn't know who is responsible for the systems that are now in place. It is the collision of the colonial and the everyday. In Cambara's realization the threat to the collective becomes apparent. Cambara sees the situation in terms of ecosystems, which are living, growing things. It is in colonialism that the seeds of trauma are planted, but then the system took on a life of its own and grew into every aspect of everyday life. From these original systems new traumas have sprung, like Barre's regime or the civil war, but that does not mean they are not autonomous – their own species within the larger ecosystem. *Knots* has woven together a series of layers and meanings, like a tangled vine, in an effort to get past the blinding question of who to blame.

Everyday Trauma

To begin to understand the ways in which the tangled vine of trauma has grown into everyday life we have to look at more subtle discussions of trauma in *Knots*. Cambara also comes to the narrative in the aftermath of her cataclysmic event, just like Bile. However, her traumatic fallout manifests more faintly than does Bile's. The first we hear of Cambara's particular trauma is when the death of her son is mentioned in passing. It comes four pages after the initial question of "who do you blame" and is just one of the happenings to which the question could pertain. All we hear is she had been "known lately to be off her rocker, understandably so, because the death of her son" (Farah 4). The death is handled with a light hand because it is not the death that is important, what is important is that Cambara has been "off her rocker." We are not here to deal with the traumatic moment, but instead to begin to see the repercussions of that moment. Cambara is not here to represent the plight of the political state of Somalia, but instead she serves to connect that plight to the traumas that pepper the everyday lives of the people, especially women, now living in Somalia. Bile's trauma took place in the public sphere, while Cambara's took place in the private.

There can be no mistake that we are supposed to understand the Cambara is struggling with the aftermath of a traumatic event. Avoidance of any people, places, or things that remind a person of the traumatic event is one of the first stated symptoms of PTSD. She herself sees her move to Mogadiscio as a "desperate attempt to put an ocean between herself and Wardi [whom she blames for the death of her son]" (Farah 4). Another symptom of PTSD is reckless behavior, such as moving to war-torn Mogadiscio to rescue the family property from a warlord, a plan Cambara's mother calls "suicidal"

and “insane” (Farah 10). She even has the quintessential nightmares causing her to wake in Mogadiscio in an apparent sweat” (Farah 286).

Cambara is living with post-traumatic stress from the death of her son, and in doing so she stands for all the Somalis who have suffered a life altering loss, whether in the shape of a child to war or starvation, or in the shape of a state to destabilization or greed. She is the bridge between the sphere of private suffering and that of public suffering. The male dominated discussion surrounding Bile and the Somali state neglects the quiet suffering of those who must carry on with life despite what they have lost. Often these people have experienced traumatic events like Cambara’s that are classified as “insidious” because they are hidden from public view and/or because they happen on such a large scale that they become common in the collective consciousness. This prevalence, however, in no way lessens the traumatic fallout for the individual or the collective.

After Cambara, the floodgates of insidious trauma that *Knots* investigates open. There is Kiin who is separated from her husband and fighting for custody of her two daughters. If she loses then she too will join Cambara and the thousands of other Somali women who have lost their children. She tells Cambara,

“Myself, I have had the displeasure to put on a *khimaar* [Somali for Hijab of the full body veil] and a *shukka* [an ankle length button down cloak that accompanies the hijab] today to appease a posse of men in saintly robes: my father-in-law and his cronies, who deigned to command me to present myself before them. Do you know the topic of our discussion? The custody of my two daughters. In other words, am I fit enough to mother them in the way tradition

demands? I wore the *khimaar* and the *shukka* not because I like doing so but because I hadn't the guts to displease them. Who are they to question my ability to raise my daughters? You might as well ask. And if I'm found to be unfit, then they will award the custody of my children to their stepmother, my estranged husband's older sister, a barren woman. Now why am I telling you any of this? I am doing so because I want you to get used to doing things from which you may not derive the slightest pleasure but which will help you get some purchase on what you not need: a place to call home, food to eat, a school, clothes, and someone's affections" (Farah 244).

Here is a woman experiencing a kind of strain that is not immediately recognizable as traumatic but which might lead to tragic consequences. If Kiin is to lose her daughters, because of forces beyond her control, how is she any different from Cambara? What is more, Kiin is voicing the struggle faced by all Somalis who live in a constant state of fear that they will not have enough food to eat, or a roof over their heads, or clothes to wear. These are basic needs that are not being met on a daily basis for thousands of Somalis. Kiin becomes the voice of the men, women, and children dying from drought and starvation in the Somali desert. And still even more, Kiin is being blackmailed into wearing the *khimaar* and the *shukka*. In addition to the threat of losing her children, and the nod to physical death, we are reminded of women's victimization by men and their constant state of vulnerability. This is as insidious as violence and trauma gets. It is encoded into the system of interaction, yet it is a weight that women have to live and operate under every day. This is the weight that draws them

so dangerously close to the edge that the line between everyday and extraordinary/traumatic is blurred.

People inhabit gendered spheres in Somalia. This separation has a profound impact not only on how people experience and react to trauma, but also on the type of traumatic events to which they are exposed. In the simplest terms, women and children are more likely to experience insidious, everyday, private traumas while men are more likely to experience trauma in a public sphere, an armed conflict for example. While *Knots* is set against the background of the Somali “Civil War” the novel is less concerned with how people experience the acts of war and more concerned with how the traumatic consequences of war cross over into the private sphere, because this is where trauma’s effects manifest on the societal level rather than just in individual cases. Farah is well known for his “themes of the role of women ... and [the] fragmentation of social structures from the family to the nation state in Africa” (Breitinger). Even without his predisposition towards focusing on women, using them as the central theme for *Knots* is one of the story’s greatest strengths. The limited access that Cambara, our female protagonist, affords us as readers may at first seem frustrating and provincial considering the traditional gender roles of the Somali conflict, with male warlords and boy soldiers, yet Cambara’s position as a woman allows *Knots* to showcase the more banal, yet pervasive, aspects of life during a prolonged conflict.

The use of the female perspective also allows him to connect the fracturing of the individual and family to the fracturing of a nation. *Knots* showcases a dichotomy of hurt and healing throughout the novel, using men and women as contrasting destructive and constructive forces. The male characters are damaged and repugnant. Wardi, Cambara’s

husband, is an adulterer who blatantly takes advantage of Cambara, and then, through his neglect, allows for the death of their son. Zaak, her cousin and only contact in Mogadiscio, is both literally and figuratively repulsive, his own weak character and vile habits physically manifest in his repellent breath. It is as if his horrible words taint the very air that passes through his lips. Gudcar, the warlord occupying Cambara's family property, is a thief and a wife beater who is too busy fighting over insignificant roadblocks to realize he has been displaced from his fortress.

On the other hand, there is the Women's Network which, working in quiet small ways, has the best chance of actually making things in Somalia change. These women work towards peace not because they are morally superior beings but because they are selfless enough to want a better life for their children and pragmatic enough to sense the futility of the conflict that seems just to be dawning on the militias. But even as women are seen as the constructive force, their bodies are not exempt from being areas of contention and nodes for trauma when confronted or appropriated by men. It is actually women's bodies that serve as the bridge or channel from the violence of the male public sphere into the female private sphere. In this relationship, women, Cambara specifically, become the window into the psyche of people who have experienced great loss and destructive traumatic events.

The key scene that illustrates both the contention over women's bodies and how women are the interface between war and the home is the sexually charged confrontation between the veiled Cambara and the four, armed youths. The scene begins with a spontaneous sand storm that whips up around Cambara as she walks alone down a

deserted street. The storm serves to unbalance and blind Cambara, making her vulnerability all the more obvious:

“The vortex of sand tosses her into a sidelong stumble, and she reels, staggers unsteadily, flounders forward and has immense difficulty remaining upright. ... The wind-driven grit smacks straight into her eyes, hurting and blinding her. She ceases all movement, turns her back to the surge of sand, then, to regain her balance, moves blindly backwards, her eyes shut” (Farah 161).

Nature’s fury serves to place Cambara at a disadvantage that she is not accustomed to as a modern, westernized woman who happens to be armed with a knife. As the shadowy figures move towards her she reflects that she has never “been mugged, or raped herself, except when acting. She has heard it said that raping women is the principal delight of Mogadiscio youth” (Farah 162). Cambara is trained in self-defense and carrying a knife yet, the sandstorm incapacitates her. Her helplessness in this moment, despite her best interests, illustrate how violence and trauma enters into the private sphere via women’s bodies, regardless of what precautions an individual woman might take. The threat to Cambara only grows as the scene progresses, “Red-Eyed Randy cups his crotch in his hands and fondles the entire area, his stare trained on her. ‘Don’t you want it?’ he asks ... [he] starts gesticulating as though masturbating” (Farah 163-164). The intense sexualizing of the threat is indicative of the type of trauma that is experienced by women. Yet at the same time, the boys are bickering amongst themselves. One of them is advocating for her, “Please leave this woman alone. Can’t you see? She is respectably veiled” (Farah 165). These boys, arguing over the merits of her veil, will decide Cambara’s fate. It is ironic that this argument centers on Cambara’s veil. The veil

is supposed to protect women from the precise situation that Cambara finds herself in. Red-eyed Randy says, “It’s such a shame you have to cover yourself. Why hide the beauty with which God blessed you?” (Farah 163).

Randy is the answer to his own question. Cambara’s veil is supposed to protect her from people like him, but instead it has made her a target for this particular gang. The system of modesty was constructed to combat a perceived threat to women, yet in its very existence it endangers women, not just because it allows the culture of violence towards women to continue, but also because the veil has very real, physical constraints. Cambara realizes that if she were to be attacked, none of her self-defense karate would be any use because the veil is so restrictive of her movements. Cambara has followed the rules prescribed by the society and yet she has found herself entrapped by them. Her female body makes her vulnerable despite all her precautions. This vulnerability is precisely what makes women the main, albeit unwilling, conduits for trauma to pass from the public to the private spheres. Their gender and position in society places them at the interface between the external world, where people like Randy roam, and the internal world, like the space her body inhabits under her veil.

Structure & Trauma

Knots goes beyond just a literal, content-based way of thinking about trauma. The structure and language of the book also reflect back an interpretation of trauma, an interpretation that mirrors the unconscious/subconscious aspects of trauma. The book is told all in the present tense, even when that choice does not serve the best interest of the narrative. This tense choice is indicative of the way that traumatic memory, the source of all traumatic fallout, functions. Traumatic or intrusive memories keep the past moment

of trauma always in the present. While *Knots* is primarily concerned with the aftermath of traumatic events, one of the aspects of trauma that makes an event traumatic is the inability of a person to keep the event in the past.

Both the disembodied narration of *Knots*, as well as the interspersed ambiguity of dialogue, endeavors to create for the reader a small sense of what experiencing traumatic memory could be like. It can be as simple as the following beginning of a sentence: “A woman’s voice, Cambara’s, replies” (Farah 98). The physical structure of this beginning detaches Cambara from her own voice. Since Cambara is the protagonist and the only character whose thoughts the reader has access to this rupture catches readers off guard and unbalances them. This brief moment of separation suggests a kind of confusion that recalls a fugue state.

In many ways the anonymity of the narrator continues this idea of a fugue. One way to consider the narrator is as the new identity that Cambara has created to deal with her own trauma. The narrator dictates Cambara’s actions and speech, but also has access to her thoughts and sees the world through her eyes. Yet it is always unclear who this narrator is speaking to like, for example, when in the middle of giving a description of Cambara’s actions it says, “Call it what you like: jealousy, ... call it in character to reverting to type” (Farah 99). There is no context for who the “you” the narrator is addressing might be. It could be Cambara’s inner monologue, it could be an alternate identity she has created, or it could be something else all together.

Another characteristic of the book that suggests exploration of the fugue idea is the complete lack of passing time. We are given no major moments in history to mark the overall time that she is in Somalia; all we are told is that people are living in

“abnormal times” (Farah 100). Cambara is on an unusual sleep schedule, which is partially explained by jet lag, so we cannot mark the passing of days by when she sleeps and wakes. In fact, we never know exactly how long she has been in Somalia, or even how long she planned on staying.

Just as no individual will experience a traumatic aftermath that fits all of the clinical symptoms exactly, so too is *Knots* not a perfect black and white example from a psychology textbook. Instead, *Knots* creates a feeling and experience for the reader that leaves them unsure and unsettled. There is no black and white, just a sea of grey that creates unease. It is unclear whether it is just the characters in the book that are falling apart or if it is the book itself that is, but in the end, just as it does not truly matter who we blame, it does not matter that we diagnose *Knots*. It is the empathetic experience created for the reader, to emulate living in “abnormal” and threatening times that is important.

Therapy & Healing

Sometimes it is possible to prove the existence of a thing not by seeing its presence but by identifying the force acting in opposition to it, like identifying planets by the gravitational pull they exert on their sun. In *Knots* even if we cannot convincingly see the trauma, its existence can be proven by the presence of healing. While healing takes place on an individual level, with the reunion of Gacal and his mother, with Cambara caring for Bile, with Jiijo escaping from Gudcar, and Cambara coming back to life, it takes place on a supra-individual level in Cambara’s play.

Prior to traveling to Somalia, Cambara was working on writing a play and decides to celebrate the return of her property by staging the play, with the help of the Women's Network, in her reclaimed living room.

In his book *Drama as Therapy*, Phil Jones explains that drama can be used as a form of therapy because “drama and theatre are ways of actively participating in the world and are not merely an imitation of it” (Jones 3). Dramatherapy is simply “involvement in drama with a healing intention” (Jones 8). Towards the end of the novel Cambara suddenly becomes aware of the multitude of people who are committed to her project:

Cambara looks around and observes these women's frenetic movements. Impressed and invigorated by what she sees, she feels heartened by the commitment of the young women, though she hasn't a precise idea what they are committed to. Maybe to peace and to the coexistence of the warring communities through collaborating on theatre projects that are deemed beneficial to all (Farah 400).

The inclusion and focus on the play is not accidental. It is a direct nod to this growing field of dramatherapy. Dramatherapy has taken hold in Uganda, as a way of working with traumatized child soldiers and street children. According to his biography by the European Graduate School, Farah spent some of his time in exile living in Uganda where he would have had lots of exposure to the practice. The organization Uganda Heritage Roots uses “Ugandan traditional performing arts to rehabilitate street children, orphaned children, children displaced by war and other vulnerable young people in Kampala and its suburbs” (Uganda Heritage Roots).

The organization World Vision uses arts therapy in Northern Uganda (Edmondson 458). In her article about World Vision, Laura Edmondson argues that the “new wars” of the later 20th century and early 21st century, like the conflict in Northern Uganda, “increasingly target civilians instead of combatants ... seeming [trying] to outdo one another in the production of spectacles of atrocity” (Edmondson 454). This particular kind of warfare, which we can also see taking place in Somalia, does something that Edmondson calls “unmaking the world” (Edmondson 455). In *Knots*, Cambara and the other characters are attempting to remake their world through the performing arts. Just as Jones argues that theatre is not merely the reflection of reality but the creation of reality. Jones explains, “the drama process contains the therapy” (Jones 7).

The amount of people involved in Cambara’s play, not just the actors, but the set designers, TeaWoman, ScriptWoman, and the spectators, suggests that it is not just an individual being healed by this dramatherapy, but a community of people being healed by taking part in the process. Cambara’s dreams of performing the play at the National Theatre speak to the healing of a community that exists at the State level. It is in their collective healing of a community that the trauma transcends the individual mind and can be seen affecting the ties that connect people with a shared remembered past. The future of Somalia can only be found in communal negotiations of meaning because the root of their trauma is the disparity between two meanings of community.

Another attempt at re-making the world is the novel itself. The space created by the novel allows for a certain amount of consciousness to be brought to

the idea of a historic trauma. The very structural/formal experimentation that nods to trauma could be an active healing process, both for author and reader. Trauma and healing are two sides of the same coin, for healing to take place the trauma must be faced. *Knots*, both the reading and writing, allows for this conscious examination of trauma. Perhaps in the same way that taking part in the drama processes is therapy, so too is the writing of a novel therapeutic. The traumatized party is given back control over the plot, the setting, and the characters, something that colonized/traumatized people lack. While there is a fear that reading or watching such an enactment of trauma may in fact continue the cycle of trauma by “infecting” the reader or viewer, the audience may in fact find therapeutic value in the space created by the fiction. For those stuck on the question of who to blame, *Knots* allows them to transcend that worry for a time. In this space they can begin to recognize the futility of the question “who?” and visualize a future outside of that question. This future must be visualized before a person can begin to work towards it. Here again is a function served well by fiction and the creative arts.

Conclusion

Farah is a master of layered meanings. Not only does he layer different representations of trauma in *Knots* but he also uses these different layers to make two larger statements about his initial question about whom to blame. His connections between the individual and the collective trauma of Somalia through the medium of colonialism’s mark illustrates just how far in time the effects of colonialism reverberate. It is truly a cataclysmic event, yet its echoes are felt most in day-to-day life in the private sphere, hidden from view. In this we begin to understand that there is no straightforward

answer for where to place the blame. But it is through the focus on healing, both societal and individual, that the true message of *Knots* comes to light. While the majority of the novel struggles to interrogate all of the different levels of trauma in an attempt to find the singular group of people at whose feet to lay the blame, the movement towards collective healing gives rise to the idea that people have to move beyond blame. History's knots are far too tangled to unravel. All that is left to do is find a way to create a better future.

Chapter Two: Purple Hibiscus

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* interrogates the connections between the collective and individual traumas inflicted by colonialism and colonialism's legacy in Nigeria. The novel also interrogates the continuation of trauma through a cycle of violence, which persists today but has its beginning in the era of conquest and colonialism. The interconnectedness of collective and individual trauma in this colonial and post-colonial light is due to the particular structure of the colonial system. The colonial system infiltrated all aspects of the everyday lives of those on whom it was imposed. In Nigeria, as in Apartheid South Africa or the segregated American South, the system was such that it transcended its original boundaries and became so ingrained in society that even when the official structure, the mold as it were, was removed the structure of society held its shape.

Purple Hibiscus addresses not just the political realities of colonialism's effects on Nigeria, but also the more subtle forms of violence that, while originating in the colonial era, still persist today. The primary, personal cycle of violence in the narrative that is used to tease out the connections between the individual and the collective, between the private and the public, is sparked by the violence of Catholic missionaries, agents of European imperialism, against Eugene, the father of our protagonists Kambili and Jaja. In many ways *Purple Hibiscus* is Kambili and Jaja's *bildungsroman*, but they play the role of post-colonial Nigeria. One of the characters speaks of Nigeria:

There are people ... who think that we cannot rule ourselves because the few times we tried, we failed, as if all the others who rule themselves today got it right the first time. It is like telling a crawling baby who tries to

walk, and then falls back on his buttocks, to stay there. As if the adults walking past him did not all crawl, once (Adichie 301).

Just as *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age narrative for the two protagonists, so too does it explore the evolution of a nation-state and the community of Nigeria. These two layers are the basic tenants within the narrative, harkening back to the exploration of the individual and the collective, centered around the undeniable mainstay of colonization: violence.

Purple Hibiscus uses a particular type of violence – domestic abuse - in order to examine the traumatic effects of colonialism on both the individual and collective level. Domestic abuse is a unique type of violence, and interestingly similar to colonial violence, in the way it spans both the private and public spheres. In *Purple Hibiscus* domestic abuse takes on a new uniqueness as the vector for understanding the connections between collective and individual trauma, connections that show us how the traumas of colonialism persist in the collective psyche today.

Purple Hibiscus draws parallels between the nature of domestic violence and colonialism in the actions of the abusers, the actions of the abused, and the cyclical nature of the violence. Colonialism was a system of structural violence that infiltrated each part of everyday life, and domestic abuse is just as pervasive and commonplace in the lives of those whom it affects. *Purple Hibiscus* endeavors to use the similarities of these two seemingly un-relatable phenomena to illustrate the traumatic effects of colonialism on those who were colonized

Colonialism & Domestic Violence

While in actuality the motives for imperialism were greatly varied, the “white man’s burden” rationalization was one of the most popular ideologies for both rallying support at home (in the West) and for coercing the cooperation of the local population. Europeans saw it as their Christian duty to help educate the heathens and save their souls. They often likened African peoples to children and while certain actions may have seemed harsh, the Europeans knew best and did it for the Africans’ good. Forty percent of Nigerians are Christian, and *Purple Hibiscus* is concerned almost exclusively with Catholicism. *Purple Hibiscus* is very aware of the legacy this Christian imperialism left behind in terms of racial and religion inferiority complexes. Imperialism took place with the blessing, if not the expressed wish, of the Catholic hierarchy, which means that at the very least they chose to turn a blind eye to the violent atrocities that took place in the name of civilization.

In the immediate narrative, the action that takes place in the real time of the story, the abuser, the agent of the violent, imperial Christianity, is personified in the father Eugene, while the abused, the Nigerians on whom this violence was enacted, are his wife and two children. This structure is reflective of the paternalistic attitude of Western imperialism. The imperialist undertones are also reflected in the way that the abuse is discussed, not just in the handling of the actual abuse hierarchy. Eugene says to Kambili, “Everything I do for you, I do for your own good,” ...“You know that?” (Adichie 196). Yet, even as Eugene acts out his scripted role as abuser, the shadow of earlier violence looms in the background.

Eugene is at least the second generation of abuser. The first is this figure of Grandfather, the symbol of the collaborator. “He determinedly spoke English, always, in a heavy Igbo accent. He knew Latin too, often quot[ing] the articles of Vatican I” (Adichie 67). It was not enough for Grandfather to just acclimate to the new system of power, he also had to help promote the system. Kambili remembers the way “he seemed to use the word sinner in every sentence” (Adichie 68). This is the force that influenced, and possibly abused, Eugene. Grandfather’s religious tilt, shines through in the reasoning behind Eugene’s acts of violence. The first act of violence witnessed in the novel is towards Eugene’s wife, and is triggered by a religion-centered event. Mama is pregnant and after church she asks if she can stay in the car instead of going, as the family does every week, to visit the priest:

We always dropped in to visit Father Benedict after Mass.

“Let me stay in the car and wait, *biko*,” Mama said, leaning against the Mercedes. “I feel vomit in my throat.”

Papa turned to stare at her. I held my breath. It seemed a long moment, but it might have been only seconds.

“Are you sure you want to stay in the car?” Papa asked

Mama looked down; her hands were placed on her belly, to hold the wrapper from untying itself or to keep her bread and tea breakfast down.

“My body does not feel right,” she mumbled.

“I asked you if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car” (Adichie 29).

Despite the fact that Mama does accompany them to visit the church later that night Kambili reports what she hears coming from her parents’ bedroom:

I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parent's hand carved bedroom door. ... I stepped out of my room just as Jaja came out of his. We stood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border. ... We cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolor all the way downstairs (Adichie 33).

This attack, or "punishment," seems prompted by a perceived disrespect for a religious figure. In other places we see Eugene's intense belief in his own interpretation of religious dogma, (for example the beating after Kambili breaks the Eucharist fast so that she can take medicine) which to him justifies his use of corporal punishment because his actions are righteous. This recalls the beginning of the cycle of violence: the European missionaries and Grandfather. On the other hand, Kambili's description of how her mother is handled, as if she were an inanimate object, a bag of rice or a jar of paint, gives the feeling of possession, as if Eugene owns Mama and can do with her what he pleases without need for justification. The fact that both children witness this abuse and tragic aftermath nods to the continuation of violence. If this is the behavior the Jaja learns from his father, as Eugene learned it from Grandfather, who learned it from the missionaries the cycle of violence will continue.

The Stop Violence Against Women campaign attests that "domestic violence is behavior that is learned through observation and reinforcement in both the family and society" (The Advocates for Human Rights). One of the things that makes domestic abuse so insidious is the normalized use of violence in many cultures as a legitimate form

of punishment. Often, the line between spanking and beating is subjective. In a society where physical punishment is accepted the line between what is appropriate and what is abuse is all the more blurred. *Purple Hibiscus* makes it clear that physical punishment of children is something that is prevalent in Nigeria, yet the narrative also makes clear that there is a difference between what Eugene does to his family and what Nigerian society deems acceptable. Amaka, the daughter of Eugene's sister Ifeoma, relates how corporal punishment manifested in her home, which was markedly different from how violence was used in Kambili's life:

“I always got the stick on my palm,” Amaka said, joining me on the verandah. “And Obiora got his on his buttocks. ... Afterward we would talk about it for hours. I hated that. Just give me the lashes and let me out. But no, she explained why you had been flogged, what she expected you to do not to get flogged again” (Adichie 245).

The important difference here is that Aunt Ifeoma's house is one of academic logic and reasoning, as evidenced by the “hours” of discussion after a physical punishment. Ifeoma encouraged conversation and discussion as Kambili explains, “I listened to every word spoken, followed every crackle of laughter and line of banter. Aunt Ifeoma sat back and watched them [her children], eating slowly. She looked like a football coach who had done a good job with her team and was satisfied to stand next to the eighteen-yard box and watch” (Adichie). This kind of conversation, in contrast with the silence of her home, scares Kambili, but it is indicative of a difference in mindsets, a difference that carries over into the way that children are treated. Ifeoma tells Obiora, before administering the punishment that was the subject of Kambili and Amaka's

conversation, “I do not quarrel with your disagreeing with my friend. I quarrel with how you disagreed” (Adichie 245). Ifeoma’s children are encouraged to think freely, but to still conform to the standards to respect set by Nigerian society.

In Eugene’s house there is not discussion of the punishment, only assertions that the actions are in the best interest of the abused. The reasoning for the punishment is only ever given in a kind of religious language that conforms to the type of erratic thinking that characterizes abuse.

“So you saw the sin clearly and you walked right into it?” I nodded. “Yes, Papa.” “Kambili, you are precious.” His voice quavered now, like someone speaking at a funeral, choking with emotion. “You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it.” He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it towards my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed (Adichie 194).

The discussion of the perceived offense centers not on the action and avoiding it in the future, but on “striving for perfection,” which is an impossible expectation especially to have for a child. Much of the abuse in *Purple Hibiscus* centers on this question of perfection. The story of what happened to JaJa’s little finger is related thus:

When he was ten, he had missed two questions on his catechism test and was not named the best in his First Holy Communion class. Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right, and Papa drove him to St. Agnes hospital. Papa was crying, too, as he carried Jaja in his arms like a baby all the way to the car. Later, Jaja told me that Papa had avoided his right hand because it is the hand he writes with (Adichie 145).

While perfection may be something that Eugene values most highly, it is clear that hospitalization should never be the result of not attaining this perfection. In addition to the contrast with Ifeoma's use of physical punishment, it is the extreme consequences, hospitalization and lifelong deformity, that clue the reader into the presence of abuse.

Both of these instances do more than just prove that abuse is taking place. They also serve to re-enforce and re-imagine Eugene's role as the colonial agent. Eugene's punishment of his children focuses on their bodies most powerful tools of agency: their hands and feet. During the age of conquest, people often "voted with their feet," by fleeing the encroaching colonial frontier. During the high colonial era, when the colonial state was so far reaching most people had nowhere left to flee, disenfranchised native peoples were powerless because their hands were being exploited. During the era of independence it was their feet that took them to the polls, and their hands that voted for their liberation.

Hands and feet are powerful symbols of freedom and agency, and here are being appropriated by the abuser. If we return to the idea of "doing it for your own good", we can see another appropriation taking place. Eugene is purifying his daughter with water,

a symbolic act that transcends belief systems. Yet the ritual is being distorted just as the British distorted indigenous culture by “alter[ing] only those customs, traditions, and institutions that [they] deemed harmful to Nigerian progress” (Falola 110). A purifying ritual of water and flame is transformed into an incapacitating act of violence.

Regardless of the intentions, the alteration of the ritual (or custom, or tradition) is crippling. Just as Kambili hobbles around on her burned and blistered feet, the Nigerian state is still struggling to walk, let alone run, because of its own disfiguration at the hands of the British.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for how domestic abuse illustrates the continuation of collective trauma is the repetitive nature of violence in *Purple Hibiscus*. The cycle of violence starts with the missionaries who arrived in Nigeria during the era of conquest, which is when non-indigenous violence was first introduced. This is not to suggest that violence, domestic or otherwise, did not exist in the area that would become Nigeria before first contact with Western civilization. It is also important to note that there was contact with Western civilization before the conquest era. However, this contact was restricted to a select few port cities and mainly pertained to trade. It was only with permanent settlement, of which missionaries were often the first wave, that real Western violence towards the inland indigenous people began. From this initial violence springs the cycle of domestic abuse that plagues the family central to *Purple Hibiscus*.

For the victims of violence, whether it is abuse at the hands of a father or at the hands of a colonial government, not much insight can be gained from the actual actions leading up to, or during, an abusive incident. One of the hallmarks of an abusive

situation is the creation of an extensive and highly structured system of rules that are then enforced in a brutal, but erratic way. This means that the abused must become highly attuned with the whims and feelings of their abuser because their safety depends on constantly adapting to the system of the abuser. Yet in every instance the victim is powerless; whether because they are physically unable to match their abusers, or because they have been conditioned to believe they deserve their abuse. From this powerlessness steams trauma because, “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (Herman 33). The way that a victim is going to react to this kind of helplessness is not very telling if what they do is obvious self-preservation, in whatever form that might take, but if they act in a way not in line with self-preservation this tells us something important. The climax of *Purple Hibiscus*, the turning point of the narrative, is the scene where Eugene almost beats Kambili to death over a painting of Papa-Nnukuma, the grandfather that did not relinquish the old ways, who dies during the course of the narrative. Eugene rips up the painting into little pieces and throws them on the ground. Kambili falls to the ground with them and curls herself around the pieces:

“Get up!” Papa said again. I still did not move. He startled to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like a soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka’s music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself

tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my backs, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckles seemed too heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, "Please, *biko*, please." More strings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet (Adichie 211).

It is in this moment, when Kambili recklessly abandons all her learned self-preservation, that she is awakened. It is her connection to her cousin Amaka, who painted the painting and who played for her the "culturally conscious music" that gives Kambili the strength to defy her father just as the Black Consciousness movement gave Nigerians the courage to move away from the poisonous colonial system. Both Kambili, and the younger generations of Nigerians, realize the value in their pre-colonial past. Kambili chooses to risk her life protecting the image of her deceased Grandfather, the man who prayed to the ancestors every morning at sunrise; the image that was painted by the hand of her cousin, whose "culturally conscious music" plays in Kambili's head while she takes the beating. Her act is not one of blind self-sacrifice, but instead indicative of the outcome of a fierce internal struggle.

Kambili is almost killed by this beating but when she awakes in the hospital she is reborn. When she is told that her father, whose attention and approval she previously craved and coveted, "has been by your bedside every night these past three days. He has not slept a wink," she responds, "it was hard to turn my head, but I did it and looked

away” (Adichie 214). Perhaps what is even more interesting than her actions after her father catches Jaja and her with the painting are her reflections on her actions leading up to his catching her:

I knew Papa would come in to say good night, to kiss my forehead. I knew he would be wearing his wine-red pajamas that lent a slightly red shimmer to his eyes. I knew Jaja would not have enough time to slip the painting back in the bag, and that Papa would take one look at it and his eyes would narrow, his cheeks would bulge out like unripe udala fruit, his mouth would spurt Igbo words. And then it happened. Perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka – even Papa – and things were destined to not be the same, to be in their original order (Adichie 209).

It is hard to say if this moment has happened in Nigerian history yet. It appears at first to be the moment of rupture from the colonial system, when the tide of independence just couldn't be held back any longer. However, Eugene is not only the colonial system – he is also the new-colonial system. Perhaps this moment is yet to come. Perhaps it is the rupturing of the collective trauma of the colonial past. And even if that rupture brings Nigeria close to death, there comes a moment when changing the original order is more important than life. *Purple Hibiscus* makes the violent trauma of colonialism present in the person of Eugene, but it is also placed in the past through the person of Eugene. He is a colonial product just as much as he is a representation of the colonial system. Ifeoma “said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault, as one would talk about a person who

was shouting gibberish from a severe case of malaria” (Adichie 13). Eugene is a destructive force, but he is also destroyed. He is poisoned by his chronically abused wife, his own violence bringing about his own violent end. Eugene, did not see the colonizers as destructive forces. Instead, in his eyes things fell apart when the British left. It is the inherent inability of the Nigerians to run their own government that is the problem. He says,

Coups beget coups, he said, telling us about the bloody coups of the sixties, which ended up in civil war just after he left Nigeria to study in England. A coup always began a vicious cycle. Military men would always overthrow one another, because they could, because they were all power drunk (Adichie 24).

However, if *Purple Hibiscus* thought the cycle of coups begetting coups only started with Nigerian rule than the cycle would be divorced of all European things. We would be focused on the dissent between the Hausa, the Yoruba, the Igbo and the hundreds of other ethnicities that live within the modern boundaries of Nigeria. Indeed those are divisions that must be investigated, that must shoulder some of the blame for the persistence of violence in Nigeria. And yet, *Purple Hibiscus* is obvious in its avoidance of discussing ethnicity. While it is always tempting to turn towards the preconceived ideas of endemic, ethnic violence that have marked the West’s view of Africa in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras all political discussion in *Purple Hibiscus* takes place at the level of the Nigerian state. *Purple Hibiscus* offers an alternative narrative. It is not the Nigerians that are destroying themselves, but the old colonial relics that die as a result of their own abuse and in dying make way for a new

Nigeria, one that sees the value of the pre-colonial past. *Purple Hibiscus* suggests that it is only in the protection of that past, regardless of how dangerous that proves to be, that a rebirth can be possible.

Conclusion

It is hard to be certain of whether the events that take place in *Purple Hibiscus* have happened in the past, might happen in the future, or if it is both at once. This ambiguity in time connects us simultaneously to both the past and future. Perhaps the events in this narrative are so fundamental that they have happened time and time again in Nigerian history, a cycle of a cycle. Despite the possibility of an endless cycle *Purple Hibiscus* ends on an optimistic note. The monsters can be banished and the flowers still bloom. It is a bittersweet optimism, one that is aware of how broken so many things still are. Unlike *Knots*, *Purple Hibiscus* does not think that we can just forget the past, pick up and move on. This narrative sees a profound and lasting link to the past, so profound that the past is still present in the present. This colonial legacy of violence is too ingrained to be simply rooted out, yet the cycle of violence is not unbreakable. *Purple Hibiscus* seeks to break the cycle first by making it apparent that such a cycle exists and then showing that even if it almost kills you, standing against the system is survivable.

Chapter Three: Speak Rwanda

A cataclysmic event such as genocide, which irrevocably alters our perception of the world, is at once the easiest and most difficult traumatic event to understand. In many ways the obviousness of the traumatic situation allows for a clarity not seen in the more insidious situations, such as domestic abuse or modern, urban civil war. In the case of Rwanda, there is almost no question of traumatic fallout. You cannot hear of the horrors that took place during the genocide without assuming there will be psychological repercussions. However, the particular situation in Rwanda saw these repercussions reverberate on both sides of the conflict. In *Knots* and *Purple Hibiscus* traumatic experiences are inflicted unidirectionally, where the reader is privy primarily to the receiving end of the experiences. Readers are given more insight into, and therefore identify more with, those perceived as “victims” of the situation. In *Speak Rwanda* this is not the case, since *Speak Rwanda* tells the story of genocide through multiple voices. Both the victims and perpetrators of the genocide have a chance to speak.

One of the characters wonders aloud, “What do you think goes through the mind of someone who does this sort of genocidal killing?” (Pierce 119). This is just one of the many questions that *Speak Rwanda* attempts to address by giving us access to the internal narrative of someone who takes part in genocidal killing. In many ways it seems that attempting to explain something like genocide is attempting to explain the unexplainable. What is even harder to fathom is that people experienced traumatic events on both sides during and after the genocide. The one hundred days of killing were unimaginably horrible, but the humanitarian crises that erupted in the refugee camps that housed fleeing

Hutu and in violence that reoccurred in the severely overcrowded prisons that housed those accused of taking part in the genocide also had their share of horrors.

While *Speak Rwanda* does not offer any information about what happened before, during, and after the genocide that has not already been examined in countless non-fiction books on the subject, *Speak Rwanda* goes beyond facts and explanations (although there is some of that too) and nuances the idea of a purely binary conflict where Tutsi were the victims and Hutu were the perpetrators. *Speak Rwanda* even begins to contemplate the idea that an individual could be both a victim and a perpetrator, the idea that being a perpetrator is just another form of being a victim.

Speak! Rwanda

In light of the title, it is clear that voices are a central tenant of the narrative. The novel employs many narrators, ten in all. Each voice tells their story in first person and the chapters switch back and forth between voices. These voices contradict one another and echo one another. They show us that no single voice can be fully trusted. These are humans after all, and as such their recollections and experiences are unique and subjective. The voices also show us the commonality and shared humanity of people in every situation during the genocide. There are men and women, children and adults, people who barely survived attacks and people who took part in attacks. There are voices who gave orders and those who followed them.

These voices make us question the idea of fiction in a situation like Rwanda, where the violent reality is more surreal than most fiction. Even if the author's note proclaims "the characters, places, and incidents portrayed in the book are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously," the historical events are so

fresh and so graphic that the novel often reads more like a collection of biographies than a novel. What then is the point of using fiction instead of just writing another set of biographies?

Fiction allows for a more critical analysis of the overlapping victimizations and accountabilities than nonfiction. Perhaps fiction allows for a certain kind of answer to the question of what goes through the mind of someone who takes part in genocidal killing that nonfiction does not allow. Jean Hatzfeld has written a book called *Machete Season: the Killers in Rwanda Speak* that tells the stories of nine imprisoned perpetrators of the genocide. Yet, the socio-political realities of such a report dictate what kind of people will agree to tell their stories, and what kind of stories they will agree to tell. To a certain extent this is true of survivors as well, yet there is much less of a stigma attached to the experiences of those who are obvious victims of the genocide. It is incredible difficult to voice the opinion that the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide may in fact be victims themselves. In a non-fiction account readers are faced with the actual crimes of the individual; they cannot be divorced from what they have done. In fiction, the character of the perpetrator can be more sympathetic. Fiction allows for the bigger picture to be looked at. Fiction declares right at the beginning that the character(s) who embodies the murderer(s) are not a unique individual, but instead a mixture of many individuals, some real and some not. This voice is what rises from the narrative. In fiction the voice can transcend the bonds of an actual life. The ten voices in *Speak Rwanda* give us a picture greater than the experience of one person. The ten voices weave together a tapestry of experience that allows us to begin to dissect the questions of

victimization and responsibility. Genocide is the epitome of collective trauma and therefore can only be understood through a collection of experiences.

In Rwanda there is a saying that those who do not speak die. This saying is significant in light of the genocide for several reasons. First, the spoken word played a pivotal role in the genocide. Propaganda that reduced the Tutsi to cockroaches was spread for generations; orders to begin the genocide were verbally given, and even after the Hutu exodus, the *genocidaire* continued to spread fear and hate in the refugee camps. Silas, the bourgmestre, or mayor, from Butare gives a speech in a refugee camp for people who fled the RPF telling his people that if they return to Rwanda, “every women will be raped until she dies and every child skewered on a spear. Tutsi will infect them with tuberculosis and cholera” (Pierce 132). In this way the *genocidaires* kept innocent Hutus hostage in the squalid refugee camps. They kept them trapped with words, words that the aid workers did not contradict. As long as the refugees could be made to believe that horrors awaited them at home, the *genocidaires* could keep their human shields and grow rich off the aid pouring into the camps they controlled.

Second, during the genocide entire families, sometimes extended, were killed. Who will tell their story? If there is no one left to speak of them, they will be obliterated, not only killed. While silence accompanies death, one is not truly gone as long as their memory is not forgotten. As long as there are those to tell stories of the deceased, they can live on. There is immortality in the spoken word, passed mouth to mouth, generation to generation. The genocide robbed its victims even of this.

Third, in post-genocide Rwanda silence is unacceptable because people fear that to stop speaking of the genocide would be allow it to happen again. Voices do more than

just tell the story in *Speak Rwanda*. Voices become central to the narrative in every way. The title *Speak Rwanda* is not just a description of what happens in the novel, that Rwandans speak, but it is also a command. Rwandans, all of them, must speak the multifaceted truth about what happened in Rwanda if we want to ensure that it never happens again. In this context it is all the voices, not just those of the victims, that are important. Perhaps it is even more important that we hear the voices of the orchestrators and perpetrators because these are the voices that can help us start to understand the unexplainable.

Who are the victims?

An even more challenging task for *Speak Rwanda* than trying to represent the inner monologue of a genocidaire is the trying to decide who deserves to be represented as a victim. The line cannot be drawn between ethnicities. It is not only those Tutsi hacked apart by Hutu who were victims. There are Hutu victims who died at the hands the Hutu extremists because they were accused of collaboration with the Tutsi or because they were collateral damage. There are Hutu who were brainwashed for generations into believing the Tutsi were less than human and ended up becoming murders. There are who are held fairly for crimes they did commit, in jails filled five, ten, times over capacity. There are people who fled from the RPF into refugee camps like Goma and died from hunger or disease. No one person is more deserving of the title victim, not even those who were raped or tortured instead of just killed. And the actions that people took in response to their trauma, like the Tutsi who watched their families die and then killed in revenge, do not strip them of their victim status. There are layers of victimization in Rwanda, and these layers transcend ethnic lines, international borders, and time frames.

Speak Rwanda attempts to acknowledge all these layers by re-writing the identity of a victim to be more inclusive. Victims are those who experience violence, who witness violence, and even who perform violence. The victimization is not in the violent acts themselves, but in the absence of agency afforded to the victim and the silence encoded in having the violence enacted on them. Stated simply, in *Speak Rwanda* victims are those who have lost their voice to violence.

There is Immaculée who speaks to us for two chapters at the beginning of the novel. She is a Tutsi woman who flees with her children to a church when the Genocide starts. Her eighteen-year-old daughter is killed in front of her face. The daughter “opens her mouth to say something at the same time [she] grunts from what is happening to her that I [Immaculée] can’t yet see, she goes *ugh ugh*, and the blood begins pouring down her lower lip” (Pierce 46-47). In her last moment of life Immaculée’s daughter is stripped of her human voice; a voice capable of producing more than just sound. The words are replaced by blood, pouring from her mouth, death taking the place of words. Her death is both the death of her physical body, but also her thinking, rational mind. The “ugh, ugh” is literally a dying breath, her last words that aren’t words. This type of death is almost animalistic, its tragedy made worse by the dehumanization in the last minutes of life.

Immaculée’s death too is one of words cut off. She is narrating the chapter in first person and the last thing she relates is “I see a row of nails in a club coming down on the side of I see nothing of nothing of—“ Her words to the reader are literally cut off by death, giving the reader no closure. Her life, and her voice, was cut short by the genocide. This brings us back to the idea of total eradication in silence. Neither her

voice, nor her name, reappears for the rest of the narrative. She lives only in the mind of the reader despite the fact the one of her children survives. Her survival is not guaranteed because one of her family members still breathes.

Immaculéé's victimization is completed by her son's own victimization. He survives the physical death suffered by the rest of his family, but his victimization, and that of his family, are evident in his own silence. Innocent, Immaculéé's son somehow survives the massacre in the church and after nightfall he climbs out from under the pile of dead bodies and flees into the bush. Agnes, a sympathetic Hutu, finds him covered in blood and gives this description:

He said nothing. His eyes didn't focus on anything near, so in his mind he must have been somewhere else. ... Innocent's lips twitched without stopping, and the sound that came from between them made my hair stand on end. I have never heard anything like it. I have never seen the look in anyone else's eyes that I saw in his... . I have never had anyone grip my hand with such fierce need (Pierce 61).

Innocent may have survived while his mother and sister died, but as we can only imagine, he does not escape unscathed. The blood may be the blood of others, but his silence is his own. It is the mark of his traumatic experience. Here again we encounter this idea of silence, not as an absence of sound, but as an absence of words. Innocent is making a sound, one so haunting it makes Agnes's hair stand on end, but he has experienced a death of his own. Innocent has died the first part of his sister's death; he too had been reduced to less than human, unable to speak but issuing an animalist expression of his pain. He has lost control of his lips, which twitch without stopping.

The victims of the genocide are not just those who died a physical death. *Speak Rwanda* expands the definition to include those like Innocent, who in many ways died along with their families. Innocent is never the same, and he never speaks the names of those who died, adding a third layer of death for Immaculéé and her daughter. Death becomes more than just the absence of a heartbeat in *Speak Rwanda*.

Speak Rwanda enlarges the definition of victim even more as it deals with experiences that relate directly to the Genocide, but are not the stereotypical Hutu victimizing Tutsi. For example, after Agnes rescues Innocent she has to hide him from the interahamwe. She hides him in a crawl space in her home, risking her life in the process. Prior to the genocide, Agnes was being courted by Silas, the bourgmestre of Butare (the province where they live), but she kept rejecting his advances. Silas is the man responsible for orchestrating the interahamwe in Butare during the genocide so when he shows up at Agnes's house with a few of his hooligans there is real danger for both Agnes and Innocent. Silas enters the house and tells Agnes, "You look scared! Stop looking that way or I'll think you have something to hide." He points at the ceiling. "For example, up there. Is anything hidden up there?" (Pierce 68). Agnes's inner monologue responds,

Suddenly I know what is on his mind. It makes me stop trembling. I feel calm and steady because I know his thoughts. He's almost certain someone is up there, but that's not what interests him. He doesn't care about that, he only cares about having me. He could rape me, but as an important man he'd rather not. He wants me to give in. He wants me to want him for what he stands for in these hills (Pierce 68).

Agnes does give in, and is raped by Silas. She is raped because Silas takes her voice from her. He strips her of her ability to say yes or no, because in saying no she would cost Innocent his life. Agnes is a victim of genocide. She is a victim of rape.⁵ Her hands may not be bound and a literal knife is not at her throat but she has to give herself to her rapist, a man who personally orchestrated the murders of thousands of people, to save both her own, and Innocent's, physical lives. Agnes is another example of the mutilation of the voice. Violence, or the threat of violence, forces her to make the sounds that say yes to a sexual encounter, in spite of her own will, just as violence cause Innocent and his sister to issue sounds that are beyond their control.

Speak Rwanda also presents members of FAR as victims. Augustine describes the inhuman and involuntary sound issuing from a wounded FAR soldier who is just waiting to die, "it's the pain that makes him make that sound," Augustine explains, "I'd be ashamed to have it coming out of me, but I guess he doesn't even know he's making it. He can't help it. The pain makes him do it no matter how hard he tries not to make that sound" (Pierce 165). The similarities between this description and Agnes description of Innocent are eerie. Here is a young man, stripped of his voice, issuing a haunting and involuntary noise that gives witness to his trauma and pain. This man, whatever his sins, is undeniably human because his last moments are so inhuman. This animalistic noise ties him both to Innocent, Innocent's sister, and Agnes. He too is stripped of his human voice by the long act of dying. *Speak Rwanda* acknowledges his victimization even though he might have been person who killed Innocent's sister and mother and/or raped

⁵ Due to the still androcentric nature of historical and literary analysis, discussion of women's experience with sexual violence and/or general trauma, especially within the context of colonial/post-colonial Africa, is complicated. Indeed it is an area that deserves further study and contemplation. However, there is a body of literature that I could not explore in this thesis that helps flesh out the experiences of women in traumatic situations. For further discussion see Rachel Kimerling, Paige Ouimette, Jessica Wolfe, *Gender and PTSD* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002) See also Eleanor O'Gorman *The Front Line Runs Through Every Woman* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2011)

Agnes. His death transcends whatever actions he took in his life, because his process of dying takes away his humanity.

Speak Rwanda needs all of these layers of victimization to deal with the idea that Augustine, a member of the interahamwe, an organization responsible for the worst of the atrocities during the genocide, could also be a victim. This concept is almost incomprehensible, especially when the reader witnesses their actions, but it is something *Speak Rwanda* attempts to address. Augustine, Agnes's younger brother, joins the interahamwe under Silas's command and participates in the butchering of entire families of Tutsi. Through him we hear just what does go through the mind of a *genocidaire* and in these thoughts we witness the immense psychological strain that goes along with enacting such immense violence. We are given the impression that Augustine is trapped, trapped as a killer because if he were to back out now, he would be killed, or worse. Augustine says, "sometimes it seemed almost too much for me, although I didn't say so" (Pierce 91). His own silence marks him as a victim; forced to become a murderer by something that is so much bigger than he can fathom. He is trapped then in the cycle of murder because he has no voice with which to decry the violence he is a party to. His humanity and agency are stripped from him by his silence, the silence that is necessary to preserve his life. Augustine's narration informs us of the horrors he witnesses. For example,

Four men yanked a young woman from a house, I figured they were going to rape her, but they had another idea. Two of them held her while a third reached out and took hold of her hand and the fourth cut it off at the wrist. When they let her go, she fell down jerking around, screaming. Then one

of them, after lighting a cigarette held one of her legs steady by pushing his foot down on the ankle and with three big swings of his panga he severed her leg below the knee (Pierce 96).

The man who did this then turns to Augustine and says “You’re not supposed to feel anything. Me, I don’t” (Pierce 96). He then goes back to the woman and “standing on other [still living bodies] he leaned over and hacked away at her with his panga, so did his comrades, until there were just parts of her. ... Using their pangas like brooms, they swept her parts off the pile and scattered them in the dirt” (Pierce 97). How could people witness such an atrocity, let alone take part in it, and not be traumatized? A British journalist in *Speak Rwanda* voices his opinion that these people cannot be unaffected:

I think you can get past the killing, but you don’t see the worlds as it really is. You give yourself all sorts of excuses for having done what you did. You never see the worlds as it really is again. You simply can’t. What you did is irrevocable (Pierce 119).

These men certainly aren’t more victimized than those whom they killed, but they do have to live with their actions and the things they witnessed. Just as Innocent crawled out of a literal pile of bodies, Augustine crawls out of a remembered pile of bodies at the end of the genocide. And he is not unaffected. Augustine has died a death like Innocent and Agnes. They are all victims of genocide.

Who should be held accountable?

When we begin to question whether or not Augustine is a victim, we begin to question who else might qualify as a victim in *Speak Rwanda*. If we begin to expand the definitions of victimization, the next logical question is who then should be held

accountable for the Rwandan Genocide? It isn't as if people just woke up one morning and individually decided to chop up a million of their neighbors. Just as in all other collective traumas in Africa the answer that seems to be found time and time again, is that the colonial system and the few Africans who gained and kept power because of this system are responsible. Yet at the same time, if those who have been rendered silent are the traumatized then it stands to reason that those responsible were those with voices. *Speak Rwanda* is filled with disembodied voices. In the face of a million silent bodies, it is the voice that comes to represent power. A body without a voice is just another number in a mass grave, but a voice without a body had the power to fill said grave. In reimagining the meaning of victimization, *Speak Rwanda* also reimagines the meaning of responsibility. Just as new layers of victim-hood are revealed through the loss of the voice, so too are new layers of responsibility revealed through the presence of a voice.

Hate Radio

While the human voices fit together, each telling a specific part of a larger story, there is another voice that does not get a chapter of its own, but instead weaves through the entire narrative. The voice on the radio. Augustine convicts this voice saying, "I used to take orders from the radio." Specifically he means the RTLMC, *Radio-Television Libre Des Mille Collines*, also known as "The Hate Radio" (Melvern 81). The RTLMC was a radio station founded in July 1993 and it not only played a pivotal role in orchestrating the genocide once it was under way but it was also an integral part of the campaign to demonize the Tutsi (Melvern 82).

It was on the radio that Immaculéé learns of the death of the Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, "there was a program of Ethiopian music on the radio," she says,

“that I was half listening to when a voice interrupted with an announcement. President Juvenal Habyarimana has died in a plane crash tonight under mysterious circumstances (Pierce 7). This plane crash was the spark that ignited the genocide and it was over these same radio waves that the call to “Kill all the Tutsi” was broadcast. A survivor of the genocide said “if you were mentioned over the airways, you were sure to be carted off a short time later by the Interahamwe” (Melvern 83). In *Speak Rwanda* we learn “there’s no better way of learning things than through the radio. . . . RTLMC was broadcasting death warrants for the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and his wife and children and his mother” (Pierce 24).

Augustine does not only convict the voice that came through the radio, but he connects bodies to that voice:

If I had one of those voices right here right now I’d shoot him full of holes, I’d put my pistol barrel down his throat and pull the trigger, I’d cut his balls off and believe me, these are things I have learned how to do. What I hear is it’s not only the radio people that got away. The other important people who give the orders won’t be caught either. They’re all playing with girls in Nairobi, Paris, and Cairo. That’s what they tell me (Pierce 166).

Hate Radio was controlled by someone, it’s broadcast crafted and honed. It is only after the genocide is over that we begin to look past the bloody hands to the voice behind them. Where are the bodies connected to Hate Radio’s voice? Are they really off in Nairobi, Paris, and Cairo? *Speak Rwanda* does not follow these voices. In the

narrative, they are never given bodies and we do not know what becomes of the people who used hate radio to give Augustine his orders.

Happy(?) Endings

Interesting, a full half of our ten characters have relatively happy endings by the conclusion of the novel. Pacifique, the young boy who watched his mother and siblings killed, finds his way, against all odds, back to his adopted mother, Pauline. Pauline then learns that Pacifique's father, Emmanuel, survived the genocide and reunites the son with the father who thought his whole family was gone.

I am running and running and his feathers and beads get closer until I reach them and with my arms around him and his arms around me I know I am home, I am back home now forever, and I feel him laughing against me and the feathers tickling and I am laughing too and we are laughing together, one against the other (Pierce 292).

Stephen, the RPF soldier who grew up in Uganda and was part of the liberating army ends up engaged to Agnes.

Last night I dreamed of our upcoming wedding. There are many weddings these days in our country. People hope for a new chance at life. In the old days our two families would negotiate a bride-price and invoke ancestral spirits for good luck. My father would bless a pot of beer. There would be a major sacrifice to Lyangombe, spirit of fecundity, performed by Agnes's family. In today's chaotic world there's no transfer of bride-price (Pierce 262).

In both these stories of unification there are echoes of the remembered past. Stephan reflects on how marriage rituals would have been performed. He knows the rituals well, and yet asserts that they will not take place. The beads and feathers that Pacifique mentions are part of his father's ritual Intore dance costume. This costume dates from the days of the royal Tutsi court and Emmanuel, Pacifique's father, is a renowned dancer (Pierce 103). But this costume also holds significance in the recent past. Emmanuel was wearing the costume when he killed his Hutu neighbor to avenge his family. The wife of this neighbor protected Emmanuel's home from looting, even after he killed her husband in front of her.

It is also in these unifications that the fiction of the narrative becomes apparent. It seems a bit utopian that everything ends up so neatly. Even the "antagonists" are neatly wrapped up, despite their endings not being quintessentially happy. Augustine ends up in prison and Silas, ends up in front of the international tribunal facing charges of war crimes. But then upon closer examination we realize things are not quite as neat as they first appear. Where has the reality, so well persevered by the use of multiple voices, gone? The contributions of the narrators remind us that they are all human, and subject to human failings, yet the neatness of the endings seems to erase some of the humanness of the narrative. The fictions, which served a great purpose in investigating and enlarging the category of victim, beings to fail when it comes to resolving the stories of those victims.

In fact, the marriage of star-crossed, Tutsi and Hutu, lovers and the improbable reunification of families, gesture more to the trajectory of a Western fairytale than they

do to the real process of forgiveness and reconciliation in Rwanda which begs the question, who's need is being served by these endings?

Certainly, there is a ring of truth about Agnes's observation that on the streets of Kigali "the more I studied people, the more I saw in their eyes a deep sadness. No matter what the rest of a face told me, the eyes carried a terrible message. Every day, Hutu and Tutsi, we passed one another in the secret knowledge that our thoughts had us wading through the blood of a million bodies" (Pierce 251). Indeed, life is going on in Rwanda. It is impossible to not witness life at every turn in the most densely populated country on Earth. But it is also true that deep scars and divisions remain. The parliamentary building in Kigali still has a façade pockmarked by bullet holes. But, even while *Speak Rwanda* acknowledges the deep wounds and the inconceivable price of the genocide, the Hutu and the Tutsi somehow manage to pass one another on the street everyday. Agnes recognizes the sadness in *everyone's* eyes. She herself is a Hutu, but she sees more than just the Hutu pain. She knows what happened to the Tutsi, but she sees more than just their pain too. Agnes shows us that the sadness in Rwanda transcends the ethnic boundaries. Innocent too, goes on to say that "some of them [the children] die smiling" (Pierce 175). Life and death dwell side by side, happiness and sorrow go hand in hand, and the old ways of being and thinking persist even if they are overshadowed by the new. But as sadness has transcended boundaries it has brought people with it. Ethnicity is now "officially" banned in Rwanda. People are no longer classified as Tutsi and Hutu, but instead they are simply Rwandan.

Is this ending merely indicative of the West's continued neo-colonialism of ideas? Are these "happy endings" serving the Western reader, who worn out after reading about

the horrors of genocide, needs some comfort? Or are these happy endings the same type of writing therapy as we saw in *Knots*'s formal experimentation? After all, if this unification cannot even exist in fiction, if it cannot even be imagined, how will it ever exist in reality?

Conclusion

Speak Rwanda encapsulates the value of fiction in dealing with cataclysmic events. The obviousness of the trauma is so blinding that in dealing with non-fiction people can make the crucial mistake of thinking that the only victims are the obvious ones. Instead, *Speak Rwanda* finds that the category of victims needs to be rewritten and enlarged for Rwanda. While those who should be held responsible may never be more than just disembodied voices, there may still be healing that can take place on both sides of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy if the narrow definitions of victim can be breached. Perhaps this transcending healing will also heal the country in the ways that *Speak Rwanda* imagines marriage and children might do. The collective nature of the trauma begs for a collective type of healing, yet for this collective healing to take place, the idea of who exactly is in that collective must be explored.

Conclusion

Fiction possesses an immense ability to represent and preserve trauma. While the scientific study of collective trauma is still young, African authors are using literature as a medium to discuss and explore all aspects of their problematic pasts. They have all begun to realize the capacity of fiction not only to preserve traumatic experience and pass it onto future generations, but also to begin to imagine a future not dominated by the violent past. Fiction becomes a medium of healing, for the writer and the reader.

Standing in the midst of the sprawling, pulsing mass of people that was the Goma refugee camp Agnes says, “I felt something then that I never felt before or since. I felt that truly the world was one place, that we were all linked together by an invisible thread running from one soul to another” (Pierce 202). This thread of life that connects us all is exactly the gift that literature gives us; for one brief moment we are brought into someone else’s life and it will never leave us. We cling to the things that are most familiar and can only begin to imagine how multiplied our own emotions would be if we were actually reading these stories in bombed out Mogadisco, or next to the hibiscus in Enugu, or at the Genocide Memorial in Kigali. It is in my own tears, spilled over the reunification of father and son at the end of *Speak Rwanda* that I begin to understand how literature carries and conveys the sorrows of a people from one generation to the next, across time and across geography. Just as the Hutus and Tutsis are struggling to discover, we too struggle to understand how we are all human. Literature gives us moments of clarity and understanding, when the pain and experiences of others can touch us and leave us to never be the same.

When I returned from Rwanda I was driven to tell the story of this beautiful, remarkable, horrifying place, because the range of human experience was so dramatic there. In the wake of unimaginable evil there is unimaginable hope and forgiveness. While the violence and cruelty is stunning, it is the kindness and the forgiveness, that most draws my tears. At the end of *Knots*, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Speak Rwanda* is the same undeniable substance: hope. The reader may not identify as African but in the literature from the Continent readers are given a chance to share their experience and to be undeniably altered.

African voices so seldom shine through in the media, often the West's only portal to life on the ground in Africa, but in literature those voices get to speak. They get to lay blame at the feet of those whom they deem guilty, and they get to struggle within themselves to forgive the unimaginable in their past, present, and future. The irrepressible hope that rises like a phoenix from the rubble of colonialism, civil war, violence, and genocide can be seen, felt, and heard. How can anyone ask if Africa is doomed? If you listen to their voices you will hear the dawn of a new day, one filled with apprehension and fear and bitter ghosts of the past, but also hope, always hope. To me this is what makes these characters, authors, and people so remarkable. A person always has the choice to dwell on the evil committed, but all of these narratives choose to look instead at the good that is shaping tomorrow one tiny agonizing step at a time. I want to be part of this remarkable rebirth. Solzhenitsyn said, "gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts." It is in this cotemporary fiction from Africa that we can see

this line drawn and the battle waged over which part of our, humanity's, heart will win out.

These types of imaginings may seem like the pointless pipedreams of a bunch of dreamers to the pragmatists of the world. However, Ervin Staub, a seminal scholar in the psychology of peace and violence, postulated in a recent talk that genocides happen in part due to an unhealed, collective, historical trauma (Staub). If there is collective trauma than there must too be collective healing. Fiction plays two pivotal roles in the healing of these traumas. First, fiction can serve to merely keep the traumas alive if it does not also attempt to deal with transcending or healing from the experience. Second, it is in fiction that the imagining of an altered future can take place. If Kambili did not realize there were other ways of existing, she would not have been able to break free from her tyrannical father. If the Hutu and Tutsi cannot begin to imagine a world where they are not pitted against one another, they will never be able to coexist. If we cannot imagine what it would be like for the good parts of ourselves to shine, nothing will stop the evil halves of our hearts from dominating our actions. These voices from the Continent dare to dream that healing is possible, even as people cling to the traumas of their past. This resilient hope springs eternal and the thread that connects us weaves on. It is both terrifying and comforting to realize that everything experienced here is ours, because in our distant, distant pasts, we are all Africans.

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