

ALTERNATIVE WAYS INTO CRITICAL DISCOURSE THROUGH MEMOIR AND FICTION

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Memoir

Anyone with a knowledge of postcolonial theory or an interest in postcolonial writing is familiar with the sorts of knotty questions that they present. What is home? Who belongs there? What is the role of race in defining identity? How to negotiate class and power relationships inherited from colonialism? How is gender implicated in these relationships? What is the effect of migration on concepts of belonging? And, how to represent these concerns within an artistic or creative form, whether narrative or poetic or plastic. For a writer, what literary techniques and devices are appropriate to the various forms of ambiguity, hybridity and boundary-shifting which characterise a postcolonial experience? How does the writer place herself in relation to her story? Who is she speaking to? Who is going to publish her writing? Who's going to listen? In my case, there is a further question. I'm trying to write a memoir of growing up in Tanzania in the 50s and 60s. The question is, what is my relationship to a place I left 40 years ago? Can I be African if I'm white? And can I still be African if I live in the West Indies? Assuming the answer is yes, what is the role of the white immigrant in the project of postcolonial identity construction in Africa? How does she invoke the past without succumbing to nostalgia, or speak of place without reproducing colonial modes of discursive appropriation?

Accounts of living/growing up in Africa by white writers have long been recognized as a distinct sub-genre, but lately published narratives have taken a new direction. As a generation of white children brought up in Africa has come to consciousness of their position in the world, especially the ambivalences of their anomalous national identity, numerous stories of white experiences of Africa have appeared, combining elements of autobiography and fiction, travel writing and social observation. Intertextual with all the later narratives is Karen Blixen's Out of Africa (1937). The period her memoir represents, however – the colonial heyday, before both the Second World War and the Independence movement – has been superseded by a recent spate of publications written from a distinctly postcolonial perspective. The predominance, in this sub-genre, of narratives of childhood bears witness to the indelible effect of an early encounter with Africa. But there is a world of difference between earlier, colonial narratives like Elspeth Huxley's Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood (1959) and those which have emerged in the last decade or so written on the whole by people who were born in the run-up to Independence. I am thinking here of such works as Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight (2002) by Alexandra Fuller, Before the Knife (2002) by Carolyn Slaughter, Gods of Noonday: a White Girl's African Life (2003) by Elaine Neil Orr, Nowhere in Africa (2004) by Stephanie Zweig, Mukiwa: a White Boy in Africa (1996) by Peter Godwin and Zanzibar Chest (2003) by Aidan Hartley, and my own collection of short stories based on my 'African' childhood, Chameleon (2007). These are works which pressurized their writers into writing them, accounts through which the writers themselves attempt to make sense of the conundrum of colonialism: the illegitimacy of the white presence in Africa, counterpoised with the passionate attachment felt by most of these writers for the place of their birth.

I'd like to suggest that we can view these narratives as evidence of the collective postcolonial rewriting of the Out of Africa archetype, either overtly rejecting its mythical and romantic tendencies, or in some cases lovingly recreating them. By viewing them

dialectically and dialogically, we can see how lingering myths of Empire and the seduction of otherness can both shape narrative, and provide a vehicle for radical subversion. What emerges is a new vision of that tenacious and contested desire of white natives and resident ex-patriates to *be* 'African.' *Being African*. African writing, before and since Independence, has been centrally concerned with the question of identity – with the construction of an appropriate self for the postcolonial era. The questions thrown up by this project – of form, of an appropriate language, of social responsibility versus individual self-expression – have not traditionally included the place of African-born Europeans or their struggles for identity, which have been of limited and marginal interest in the context of African modernity. Yet the new body of work by self-styled 'white Africans' shows, if it shows anything, a concurrence of interests with the larger African project of self-construction. If African writing bears witness, above all, to the diversity and multiplicity of African identities, writing by these 'other Africans' only serves to emphasise the point. The insistent message of African fiction is that there *is* no one, single, homogeneous 'African' perspective, identity or way of being, and that the concept of 'Africanness' is necessarily inflected by particular histories and experiences, including migration, exile, displacement and distance. The time has come when writing by African-born Europeans can start to be viewed as part of and intrinsic to the wider postcolonial African story.

The stories in the collection *Chameleon* had been part of my mental furniture for more than 30 years before I wrote them down. But I was writing long before that: as a child, from the age of 8 and into my twenties, I kept diaries. These diaries were my starting point for the project which follows the stories, the book I am working on at the moment. But between the stories and this project, something happened of key significance: in 2004, I returned to Tanzania for the first time since my family's abrupt departure in 1968, after an absence of 36 years. My account of that first experience of coming back has been published as an essay titled "The Walking Dream." What I want to emphasise here is something very obvious but which I had to go back to realize. That Moshi, the place where I had lived, and by extension the country Tanzania, had been there all along, a physical reality and not a dream at all. That people born at the same time as me had lived and died, as I could see from the headstones in the Moshi graveyard, but that others were living still, some of them with far longer histories than mine. It came to me that what was interesting was not so much those dusty diaries or the dreams in my head, but Tanzania today, and the ways in which I could intersect with it through shared memories of a particular time.

And so I outlined to myself the kind of book I want to write. Although the narrative point of view is mine, the focus is less on the colonial child and more on past and contemporary perspectives on living in a particular place, Moshi, and its region, Kilimanjaro. On sabbatical in 2007, I collected life-stories that might help to illuminate political and social issues facing the country today (the effect of liberalisation, the impact of tourism, the situation of the Masai, as some examples). Above all, I want to keep the perspectives personal, to view the wider issues through the eyes of living individuals. In other words, going back brought home to me the political dimension of representation. As a literary critic, I am all too aware of Postmodernism's critique of subjectivity and representation, the way it has destabilised the notion of the unified and coherent speaking subject. I find the only posture I can adopt as a writer is a critical self-reflexive one, a narrative perspective which is always self-conscious and ironic, and making free use of intertextuality, historiographic metafiction and counter-memory. In this way, I become the critic of my own writing, always conscious of the 'unreliability' of the critical as well as authorial voice.

In emphasising the 'politics of representation,' I am following Linda Hutcheon in The Politics of Postmodernism (1989). She argues against a concept of postmodernism which, by emphasising exclusively notions of decenteredness, mimicry and the endless proliferation of ironies, depoliticises even as it undermines and calls into question dominant ideological forms. Hutcheon argues instead for what she calls a 'complicitous critique,' which works by revealing hidden tensions and is potentially subversive of dominant norms. She claims, in fact, that, "Postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations - its images and stories - are anything but neutral, however 'aestheticised' they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity" (3). She posits that the two art forms which "most self-consciously foreground (an) awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of of cultural knowledge . . . by raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation" (7) are architecture and fiction, both originally rooted in realism but now self-reflexively critiquing their own origins. She in fact redefines postmodernism in terms intrinsically of a confrontation:

where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody. At this juncture, a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past. (7)

I am now going to share with you extracts from two pieces of writing, one 'memoir' and one a piece of intertextual fiction. The first piece was written in response to a call for contributions to a festschrift celebrating the retirement of a distinguished Swedish Africanist, Raoul Grandqvist. The volume, entitled Exits, is forthcoming with Dangaroo Press, and my contribution, based on my second experience of visiting Tanzania, when I spent three months based in Moshi or travelling from there, is called "Myself as a puff of dust: a ghost story." I think it is obvious right away what I am trying to do: while I am accepting that I am the narrating voice, rather than situating myself as the solid centre of the narrative, from where sense is made and reality is organised, I have chosen to attribute to myself a position which is not only marginal but actually insubstantial and incorporeal. The extract takes place in a graveyard, where though I am one of the ghosts, I am still an outsider among them because their bodies have found a way to stay while I am only visiting. The dead become my guides. The graveyard is a site of history, the history of the town and the mountain, and it shows even in death the hierarchy of the living: from the solid inscribed tombstones of colonial servants to the orderly and cared for ranks of war graves to the disorderly and fast disappearing graves of the more recently dead. It embodies, if you like, the whole colonial and postcolonial story, but this story is apprehended as a phenomenon of the narrator's senses as she wanders through the graveyard.

"Myself as a Puff of Dust: a Ghost Story"

If there's a leaving, there can be a return, even though the one who returns is not the one who left. This conundrum is at the heart of exile. Who left, and who returns, and how can they co-exist? My feet asked this question when they carried me to the graveyard in Moshi, a town I lived but did not die in, a place I left but could never leave. For forty years, I haunted this place in my dreams. When I at last returned, very few of the living were known to me, and I was unknown to them. A ghost from an almost unremembered past, I went in search of those who had found a permanent way to stay, mingling their substance with the dust, releasing the spirit to join me in my wanderings.

My feet led me down a dusty track to the cemetery, and entered a section laid out with graves from both World Wars. This part was orderly and well maintained. In the First World War section, surrounded by a fence, I counted five neat rows of nineteen headstones, standing to attention just as their occupants would have done in life, in service with the King's African Rifles, the East African Engineers, the Army Service Corps, the East African Military Labour Service. The headstones told a story of men conscripted to the cause from places far away, Moslem and Christian, from many different points of origin. I imagined that many had joined up in 'British' Kenya, to march on 'German' Tanganyika. There were eighty-four more in the Second World War section, next door, where a gate with a padlock stood open and a solitary gardener worked between the rows. A workmanlike notice bristled with information. I learnt that 50,000 soldiers and porters, from Britain, India and East, South and West Africa, died in the First World War East African campaign, struggling across terrain unmarked by roads, plagued by tsetse fly, thirsty and hot and far from home. Most have no graves, but here in the cemetery the white headstones looked like sails mounted on invisible boats sailing in formation towards eternity. Compared to them I was adrift like smoke on a windless day.

Away from the war graves, the cemetery loses its military precision. It occupies a space between two roads, with no defining boundaries, no clear entrance or exit. There's no building to give it focus, no sense of layout, no orderly rows or paths between the graves. The dead have built their own community here, extending the space they occupy one mound after another, an organic fellowship of baked earth, wooden crosses and dust. The newer graves are nearer the road, their freshly painted crosses festooned with tinsel and brightly coloured plastic flowers. The dates of birth of many who have taken up residence approximate to mine, and fifty is a good age for dying. Standing upright in this place where everyone else lies supine, the hot sun prickling my skin, the hum of a million infinitesimal insects in my ears, the scent of scorched dust in my nose, I feel acutely and foolishly aware of being alive. Why me and not them is a question that defeats me.

I move on, picking my way further and further in, and gradually the tinsel and pink plastic roses disappear and the graves are older, with carved headstones. The people buried here had the means of proclaiming themselves for posterity, beyond the recording of a name and date on a wooden cross that would crumble to dust in a few years. Some of them were famous even. The town has seen a stream of explorers ever since it was made known to the outside world that there was such a thing as a snow-covered mountain practically on the Equator. From then on, the mountain became a target for geologists, botanists and climbers, despite the attempt of one William Desborough Cooley to deny the existence of snow. "The nocturnal fall of snow at the hottest time of the year below the Equator, at a height of 13,000 feet, is clearly a fabrication to confirm the fantastic assertion that permanent snow lies at 12,500 feet and lower on Kilimanjaro," he proclaimed some time in the 1860s. Among those who continually proved him wrong was the man whose mortal remains now lie at my feet. I read the epitaph he must have written for himself in anticipation of his death, airborne between the coast, where he lived, and the mountain that he loved:

To the memory of Clement Gillman

28th Nov. **1882** - 5th Oct. **1946**

Who led a commonsense and therefore happy life

Because he stubbornly refused to be bamboozled

By his female relations
 By his scientific friends and by the rulers
 Spiritual and secular of the society
 Into which without his consent he was born.

Gillman's recipe for happiness: total self-centredness, the ability to ignore other people's opinions, carelessness of convention and social expectations. Pretty much par for the course, I think, for an early twentieth century adventurer in Africa, a man with the means to make choices and an Empire in which to exercise them. It certainly worked, propelling him to the summit of Kilimanjaro for the first time in 1921. What's interesting is that he was still here, working as a geographer, twenty-five years later, at an age when he should have been cultivating a garden in the Home Counties. He came in 1905 as a surveyor for a German railway company, and stayed when the British took over. He wrote a book about the Tanganyika railways, but his real memorial is Gillman Point on the edge of the Kilimanjaro crater. He climbed often, sharing a bottle of champagne with his wife when they got to the summit. With the thin air up there and the alcohol in their blood, they must have floated back down the mountain - but what style, what disdain for scientific warnings about lack of oxygen. I can just hear his female relatives (not including his wife) tut-tutting over the contents of his backpack: what, no clean socks but a bottle of Bollinger? Really Clement, don't you think. . . . But Clement has gone, up the mountain, down the railway track, to wherever he can't hear feminine, scientific, pious or political muttering.

Clement wasn't alone in his choice of a resting place. A little further on I stop and read:

In Loving and Grateful Remembrance Before God
 of Albert Arthur Mangwall Isherwood, CMG, OBE.

Born in Cumberland 1889.

Died at Moshi 1957.

A Colonial Civil Servant

Who Served Tanganyika from 1917 - 1954.

'For with thee is the well of life

And in thy light shall we see light.'

I was six when Albert Arthur died, and living here, in Moshi. Our lives crossed, however tangentially. Where was he as I walked to school in my grey felt hat and purple and white check school dress? Did he drive by and see me, child of the new generation of colonial servants who flowed in after the War? What made him stay after he had retired, rather than return home to Cumberland? Did he find here the well of life and stay to drink? Does his ghost wander, like mine, along the avenues of jacarandas, watching the light fade on that snowy summit on the Equator that according to Mr Cooley doesn't exist?

Not everyone chose to stay. In another spot, I find the small grave of a child. I remember this child, a little boy with white blond hair who rode his bike around the neighbourhood where we lived. One day, he was knocked off it by a truck and killed. I remember his mother, who was a friend of my mother, a young woman, the red-haired wife of the bank manager. She didn't choose to leave part of herself in the ground here, but here it is. These are the colonials, the white people who intruded and rudely outstayed their welcome, refusing to go home when their time was up. They don't know it, these remnants in their

fellowship of dust, but what I feel for them is envy. They found a way to stay, while I was forced to leave. They take up a corner of the graveyard, surrounded by the people they intruded on, whose graves proliferate, pushing closer and closer to the road.

I'm in search of another intruder, the mother of a friend who was born and grew up and still lives here, but in spite of directions, I can't seem to find the grave. It should be near the road, it should have flowers and tinsel, and also, because of who she was, a headstone. But people are stealing plaques from headstones and I find out later that the family took Peggy's down to keep it safe. It was Seamus who told me the story of Peggy's funeral, one day as we were driving down from Marangu. I sat in the passenger seat and concentrated on remembering every word, but of course it was impossible. Seamus was brought up among storytellers on the slopes of Kilimanjaro by a storytelling Republican Irish mother. When he tells a story, you have no choice but to inhabit it, so I duly became part of that great cortege that wound its way down from the mountain, led by Seamus driving the coffin. In the back two young women from Peggy's hotel, that her children now run, sat beside the coffin and sang all the way.

I knew Marangu Hotel. My family used to go there for tea and to swim in the pool of icy water. We lived down the hill in Moshi, the town at the foot of the mountain. Once, when I was fifteen or so, as a treat before going back to school, my parents brought me for dinner in the hotel dining room. In the colonial style, grave uniformed waiters served one course after another as we spoke in hushed tones under the dim lights, basketwork shades casting shadows over the faded green table cloths, the napkins and white china, the dingy curtains and faded prints of Kilimanjaro on the white-washed walls, the red cement floor, the heavy wooden sideboard. Peggy came and sat and chatted with my parents, along with an eight-year-old version of Seamus. After her husband died, leaving her with three small children, she battled valiantly to bring them up alone. She was a staunch and ardent Catholic, friend to many priests and a benefactor of the church. Born in Cork, she arrived with her husband and two children in the early 50s, and discovered that Marangu was just like the Cork she'd left. She stayed for the rest of her life. Seamus, her youngest, who was born in Moshi, was thirteen the first time he went to England. It was 1969 and the country had been independent for eight years. It was two years since the president had made his famous Arusha Declaration, which affected the lives of the whole population. How it affected Peggy was that she never knew when she would lose the hotel, the only security she had, where she had lived and worked and brought up four children, losing one in the process - little Sean, who died of eating malaria tablets when he was two years old. Owning property was capitalist; being white and foreign and owning property was an affront to socialist Tanzania. After living from day to day for two years, when Peggy got to England, she collapsed in the taxi from the airport and was in hospital with nervous exhaustion for two weeks.

Peggy kept the hotel and ran it till she died, giving her famous briefing to climbers about to climb the mountain, organising the guides, keeping order. As she became progressively more frail, her children started to gather around her, returning from wherever they had gone. She was close to a Catholic priest whom she irreverently called Father Pieta, an Irishman she nursed when he was sick and who felt he owed her his life. When she was dying, Fr Pieta was called, but couldn't get there till the next day. Father Louis, a Chagga priest who lived in Marangu, gave her the last rites twice. She was still alive when Fr Pieta arrived, and he sat and held her hand for hours until she died. The family asked him to officiate at the funeral, but Fr Pieta said he didn't trust himself, so Fr Louis did it. The Catholic Church at Marangu, named St Margaret's after her, is built on land donated by Peggy. The funeral of such an important elder as Mama Brice-Bennett was a momentous

occasion and the church was packed. Afterwards, according to the story, we all drove in procession down the mountain road, and on the outskirts of town, more cars joined the queue which snaked its way to the cemetery. Peggy wanted to be buried in the same grave as Sean, her little son. This required a cousin of Seamus's to break it open with a pickaxe the day before, hacking through the concrete slabs.

When he had overcome his grief, a day or two later, Fr Pieta called the family together at the graveside for a small ceremony of his own. This is what he said to them about Peggy:

Those who are dead are never gone¹:
 They are there in the thickening shadow:
 The dead are not under the earth:
 They are in the tree that rustles,
 They are in the wood that groans
 They are in the water that sleeps,
 They are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
 The dead are not dead.

The dead are not dead.
 Those who are dead are never gone;
 They are in the breast of the woman,
 They are in the child who is wailing,
 And in the firebrand which flames.
 The dead are not under the earth:
 They are in the fire that is dying,
 They are in the grasses that weep,
 They are in the whimpering rocks,
 They are in the forest, they are in the house,
 The dead are not dead.

Fr Pieta is a Catholic priest, but what he expressed here is the essence of animist belief. In this part of the world, ancestral spirits co-habit with the living. Something of the living being clings to the things that were hers, the air she breathed, the clothes she wore, the walls that sheltered her. The living being is body animated by spirit, which is perceptible as breath, or as shadow, which can be seen but not grasped. Because of this, the shade of a dead person can continue to exist. It can take the form of an animal, a dream or a cloud of dust or smoke. It can take up residence in a river, a tree or a stone, and especially on a mountain. Fr Pieta, who owed his life to Peggy, knew this. He knew that a woman who had

¹Birago Diop, quoted in P. Van Pelt, Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania (Tabora, Tanzania: TMP Book Dept., 1971; 4th ed. 1982): 53.

lived all her life on the mountain would remain there, and he was telling her children this to comfort them.

Albert Arthur Mangwall Isherwood had likewise refused to leave Moshi. Standing by his grave in the blazing sun all of a sudden I feel faint. I sit down and put my arms around my knees and rest my head on them. Bunched up on the ground like this, I must be invisible to anyone in the cemetery. I think, what if I die here, in a huddled heap. No-one can see me from the road, they won't find my body till someone else comes looking for old graves. The insects will devour me bit by bit, and my bones will fall into dust, and they won't even know who I was. In fact, the insects are starting to devour me already. As soon as I can, I get up and walk shakily through the graves towards the road. As I leave the cemetery something makes me look back. A figure is standing by Albert Arthur Isherwood's grave, looking straight at me. I blink and look again. The sun is lower now, and shadows are spreading across the graveyard. I see nothing. I leave.

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The second piece I gave as a presentation at a recent conference in Oxford in honour of the Zimbabwean writer, Dambudzo Marechera, and it is called "Bits and pieces I picked up and pocketed," a quotation from a Marechera story. Dambudzo was at New College from Sept 1974 - March 1976, when he was expelled. In 1982, two years after Independence, he returned to Zimbabwe, where he died of AIDS in 1987 at the age of 37. He is best known for his novella House of Hunger, which is also the most accessible of his works. Others - The Black Insider, Black Sunlight, Mindblast - are an iconoclastic melange of poetry, prose and drama, highly intertextual, scurrilous, violent, anti-nationalist, pornographic and above all, self-reflexive, populated by Dambudzo's many alter egos. I felt that it demanded a different kind of critical approach, one where I put myself into the text alongside him, and so I imagined a scenario where Dambudzo and I actually coincided at Oxford. In fact, I had left the year before he arrived, and I only got to know him later in London, but we both read English and were both from Africa.

"Bits and Pieces I Picked Up and Pocketed"

Through the Africa Society, Cheikh arranged for Dambudzo to give a poetry reading in the JCR at New College. We put notices up on all the JCR notice boards, and there was a good crowd, even people standing at the back. All the leftist groups were represented, and there was a sprinkling of Africans interspersed with intense white students, some of whom I recognised from lectures. We had given Dambudzo the title of Revolutionary Poet, and he obliged us by looking the part. His hair had grown into small wiry spirals around his face, he was wearing fatigues and a pair of army boots he might have bought at one of those end of the line shops, and brandishing his manuscript like a weapon. It started quietly enough, Dambudzo reading in a low voice without the hint of a stammer. At first he read poems expressing his feelings, I supposed, for Rhodesia, her granite breasts and the warmth of her arms, exile poems to which we all listened respectfully. Then he embarked on a long poem called "The Struggle," full of martial images and lines like: "Sharpen your spears for war / polish your knobkerries. . . ." This got people's attention and they listened attentively at first, but gradually the atmosphere began to change. As modernist ambiguity began to dilute righteous anger, the images became less warlike and sounded more as if they belonged in The Wasteland. Then there was a section that sounded like the Senghor poem Cheikh had translated for me, about a dark continent with breasts of mountains, except that with Senghor it was all heroic and high-flown romantic like an *ubi sunt* in an Old English poem. As Dambudzo read, his language became charged with images of sexual violence, something about a frenzy of mounting and the cock mounting his

hen. The Socialist Workers' Party corner became restive, and Anti-Apartheid murmured something to SWAPO. When he came to the final section we were back in Eliot territory, a rat gnawing at a bone, freezing sunlight and a lost couple waiting for a bus. I was a bit lost myself by now, but when he came to the last two lines, I had a flash of understanding. In the pub he was always saying things like that, things I paid no attention to because they didn't seem to invite a response, but which infused his conversation with its peculiar pungency, its edge of darkness. One time I happened to look directly at him and I caught something in his eyes which took me by surprise - something childlike and vulnerable. Call it innocence if you want. Read aloud before an audience, the lines: "the feeling is always there / that I am under a microscope," were a private confession spoken in public, a moment of self-revelation which made me catch my breath. It was both audacious and risky and it opened him, I knew, to flak.

As soon as Dambudzo stopped reading, a man stood up and shouted, "Individualist bullshit! That's not about the struggle, it's about your own self-pity." Heads turned. I recognised the man as a graduate student from St. Anthony's who I had seen once or twice at Africa Society meetings. There was a general murmur of agreement, and the man continued: "You can write that stuff from the safety of your Oxford room, but what's it doing for the comrades on the frontline? How will it help with decolonisation? Does it tell us anything about our history, or who we are today? It does not, my brother, and you should be ashamed."

A slightly older man, a Kenyan I knew slightly who had been a lecturer at the University of Nairobi until he'd had to leave in a hurry, now stood up. "Finely wrought language," he began, "cannot disguise the lack of attention to the great themes of our literature: the strength of traditional culture to withstand the assault of colonialism, the role of the artist as teacher and inspiration of his people. Pessimism and negativity are not luxuries we can afford at this stage of our development. If you continue in this direction, you will lose all clarity and disappear into the maze of western existentialism."

I was watching Dambudzo, who had rolled up his manuscript and looked ready to fling it across the room. He wasn't tall, but the intensity of his expression made him look fiercer than I had ever seen him. "I am astonished at your ignorance," he almost spat. "I did not expect such a low cultural level among you. Those who do not understand my work are simply illiterate. I will not tick all the orifices of political correctness and stimulate all the possible orgasms of brotherly love. Our so-called search for freedom has not included even the most elementary humanitarian justice. Am I supposed to identify with Idi Amin? To kiss Bokassa's ass, or masturbate at the thought of Mobutu? When literature becomes a vehicle for ideology the writer is nothing but a vampire sucking his own blood. If you expect me to be a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you!"

He might as well have sprayed the room with bullets and left the audience bleeding on the floor. Amidst the pandemonium, I saw him pick up a large pottery ashtray and hurl it at the plate-glass window that gave onto a smooth stretch of green quadrangle where a few gowned figures strolled with heads bent. The explosive crack that ripped across the still evening air stopped them dead in their tracks, while inside the room, glass sprayed and people screamed and fought for the exit. Cheikh and Martin more or less picked Dambudzo up by his elbows and shoving through the crowd, carried him bodily from the room. I stayed where I sat, frozen in shock, surrounded by shattered glass.

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