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Studies in the Novel, Volume 40, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Summer
2008, pp. 72-85 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.0.0010>

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“YOU WOULD NOT ADD TO MY SUFFERING IF YOU KNEW WHAT I HAVE SEEN”: HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN TRAUMA LITERATURE

ROBERT EAGLESTONE

The aim of this article is to explore possible correlations between literature of the Holocaust, widely defined, and recent works about genocide, mass-murder, and atrocity in Africa. It will focus on a number of texts that concern both the Rwandan genocide (Gil Courtemanche's novel/memoir *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* [2003] and Paul Rusesabagina's memoir *An Ordinary Man* [2006]) and the victims of the numerous conflicts on the continent (Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* [2005], Dave Eggers's *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* [2006], and Ismael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* [2007]). However, as both the initial hypothetical linkage and the object of discussion (African trauma literature) are problematic concepts, I will offer an introductory account of how and why this might be a fruitful comparison.

The Holocaust and the Postcolonial

In his study of the discourse of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer writes that

Strafexpedition [punitive expedition] is the first term which I recognised as being specifically National Socialist....For me the word *Strafexpedition* was the embodiment of brutal arrogance and contempt for people who are in any way different, it sounded so colonial, you could see the encircled Negro village, you could hear the cracking of the hippopotamus whip. Later, but unfortunately not for very long, this memory had something comforting about it despite all the bitterness. "A mild dose of castor oil." (43)

In this fragment, two things become proleptically clear for the future understanding of the Holocaust and twentieth-century history. The first—"it sounded so colonial"—is the complex interweaving between the discourses of empire and colonialism on the one hand and the discourses of the Third Reich and the Holocaust on the other. The second—"A mild dose..."—is the immediate diminution of these complex interweaving histories.

Working though what Dirk Moses calls "conceptual blockages" as well as issues of prejudice and layers of collective memory, historians, cultural thinkers, and philosophers are now turning with more interest to exploring the complex and contentious relationship between the Holocaust, colonialism, and genocide; and they are finding this relationship more than "a mild dose."¹ Mark Mazower, for example, notes how Hitler's "imagination was caught by the example of the British in India. Their model of imperial rule, such as he conceived it, struck him as admirable...for him the Ukraine was 'that new Indian Empire': the Eastern Front would become Germany's North-West frontier" (150). Yet those who develop these historiographical congruencies tread a delicate path. As Jürgen Zimmerer and others point out, they should try to avoid using the Holocaust as a paradigm or "benchmark" for genocide and atrocity: yet, as Moses's account of recent historical research suggests, this is very hard. He cites historians of the Armenian and Cambodian genocides who use the Holocaust as a "heuristic device" and others who develop concepts of "cumulative radicalization," "race branding" ("The Holocaust" 547-49), and more diffuse and complex links between violence, modernity, and state building, all drawing from the study of the Holocaust. Other approaches trace the impact of colonial policy, or wider European imperial discourses, on the development of the genocidal operations of the Reich. And others, too, explore contrasts between different genocides. Despite the desire not to let a small number of examples from Europe, taken without context, set the agenda, the pull of the Holocaust is sometimes simply too strong.

Those making these comparisons must also avoid the opposite risk of collapsing the Holocaust into the history of colonialism *contra* Aimé Césaire's famous comment on Nazism: "the people of Europe tolerated Nazism before it was inflicted on them...because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples" (14). And they must also avoid both the "game"—and the consequences—of drawing moral equivalents, recently paraded by one of the caricatures in Tova Reich's satirical novel *My Holocaust*, who declaims the following:

The African-American Holocaust...the Women's Holocaust...the Native American Holocaust...the Palestinian Holocaust...the Children's Holocaust, the Muslim Holocaust, the Tibetan Holocaust...The Holocaust past, present and future of nations too numerous to list, from Cambodia to Chechnya, from Russia to Rwanda... plus Ecological and Environmental Holocausts... Nuclear Holocaust, the Herbal Holocaust...the Endangered Species Holocaust

of plants and animals from bluegrass to baby seals...plus the personal and private Holocausts of our brothers and sisters everywhere...No one Holocaust is superior to another, no one Holocaust is deserving of special treatment or recognition. (243)

One way of developing this path and avoiding some of these fraught issues is to stress how the early thinkers who engaged with the Holocaust included colonial and imperial genocides as a matter of course: Moses discusses both Raphael Lemkin's work on genocide and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and argues that both thinkers saw the Holocaust in the context of other genocides and colonial mass murders. Lemkin and especially Arendt are clearly major figures whose work bears contemporary return and scrutiny. Another way of exploring this linkage is taken by the avant-garde historiographical experimentation of Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate All the Brutes*," which suggests, rather than details, grim parallels.

While historians have begun to explore these connections, there has not been a similar movement in the study of the literary and cultural representations and responses to the Holocaust. There is no clear "Holocaust Theory," but, as in many developing fields, there are a range of fluid and developing concerns and issues that stem from the field of study. These would include debates over the relationship between representation, fiction, memoir, history, and the events of the past; over genre and form (from realism, through postmodernism and what Michael Rothberg names "traumatic realism," to second-generation postmodern writers and thinkers); over writing and how we might understand truth; over ethics and responsibility and the relation of these to textuality; over the concept of "working through" (including its failure); over the "right to write" and the public sphere more generally; and over issues often summed up in the term "trauma" or "trauma culture." This is less a full taxonomy than a sense of the range of debates and issues that this area has stirred up, but such concepts have rarely been applied to postcolonial genocidal or atrocity texts.

In some ways this is strange, because in the corpus of Holocaust writing, a sense of the relationship between the colonial inheritance and the Holocaust has never gone away. Such a relationship underlies much of Pierre Vidal-Naquet's and other French intellectuals' objections to the war in Algeria. Vidal-Naquet writes,

I personally entered the fight against the Algerian war and specifically against torture...with a constant point of reference: the obsessive memory of our national injustices...and of the Nazi crimes of torture and extermination. That reference to Nazism remained in effect throughout the war. For instance, the day after the Paris pogrom of October 17 (I still regard that term as appropriate), a certain number of intellectuals, at the behest of *Les Temps Modernes*, Jean-Paul Sartre's journal, signed a manifesto..."we refuse to make any distinction between the Algerians piled up at the Palais des Sports

while waiting to be ‘dispatched’ and the Jews stored at Drancy before their deportation.” (127-28; see also Rothberg)

Charlotte Delbo, too, makes an explicit comparison:

Torture in Algeria.
My Language has been appropriated by the executioners.
Villages burned by napalm in Indochina.
Algerians hunted through the streets by the Paris police one day in October of 1961.
Algerians whose bodies were fished out of the Seine.
How often I have thought of you, Hannelore. (117)

And Jorge Semprún writes that, viewing the film *Come Back Africa*, it was “as though the film were transparent, I kept seeing the quarantine camp, while on the screen were flashing pictures of the Negro suburbs of Johannesburg” (161). André and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967) is dedicated to both Elie Wiesel and Aimé Césaire. The Holocaust, and his ambiguous reactions to Jewish identity, haunt Frantz Fanon’s work, too (see Cheyette). However, this article aims to explore a counter-influence of the literature of the Holocaust on contemporary African trauma literature.

African Trauma Literature

In recent years, there has been a sudden burst—almost like the eruption of a guilty conscience—of distressing and traumatic narratives from Africa. And, of course, this is an eruption of a guilty Western conscience that has too often passed over the particular and complex problems and difficulties in Africa. Formal political action, media interest, campaigns by NGOs, as well as the more complex and hidden tides of migration and globalization have brought these issues to the fore. However, the term “African trauma literature” is problematic. It seems to reproduce a nineteenth-century clustering of the nations and regions of Africa into a single, mythical continent and passes over the various complexities and particular situations that range from, for example, civil war and military coups in Sierra Leone, to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, to genocides in Darfur and Rwanda. It identifies Africa solely as a place of suffering. Binyavanga Wainaina’s insightful and satirical “How to Write about Africa” makes these points very clearly:

Some tips: sunsets and starvation are good.
Always use the word “Africa” or “Darkness” or “Safari” in your title....
Note that “People” means Africans who are not black, while “The People” means black Africans....
Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these....

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country....Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book....

Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.

As Wainaina suggests, these books are “Western-facing” texts aimed at a Western market. With the exception of Gil Courtemanche’s novel/memoir (originally written in French), they are written in English (the victory of Achebe over Ngugi, as it were), and not only by Africans. While they do concern the terrible evils of the continent, they do, also, offer exactly the sort of voyeurism that Wainaina satirizes. Of course, this is hard to avoid: it may be that revealing a terror is inextricably interwoven with some sort of voyeurism, and all forms of representation are polyvalent.

The term “trauma” here is problematic for reasons additional to the normal literary-theoretical ones. It could easily be argued that nearly the whole range of African literature in the second half of the twentieth century is traumatic, from Achebe’s description of the colonial encounter, to Fanon’s case studies from the Algerian War, to Ngugi’s political propaganda in *Matigari* and *A Grain of Wheat*, to Bessie Head’s agonized prose in *A Question of Power*. Moreover, the very act of locating the after-effects of the Holocaust in this context seems to betray these complexities. However, one of the many interesting issues in the current wave of African trauma literature is precisely (and, given the world-political situation, unsurprisingly) its Western, and especially US, focus. The intended audience suggests that these works are not simply memoirs, novels, or accounts.

While these texts all deal with atrocity and mass-murder, there is little reference to the Holocaust explicitly in any of them, even the two that focus on the Rwandan genocide. *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*—which is as much about sexual violence and the damage of AIDS to Rwanda as about mass murder—states that the killers choose their brutal methods because they were “too poor to build gas chambers” (233), and the leaders are compared to Nazis (163): there is a “Rwandan Nazism” (210) or “tropical Nazism” (252). Paul Rusesabagina mentions it in a discussion of the term genocide (174) and the need for a Rwandan Nuremberg (250) and hints at it with his epigraph from Albert Camus’s *The Plague*. These contrast interestingly with, for example, Philip Gourevitch’s reportage *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (1998), which is haunted by the Holocaust. Gourevitch’s epigraph compares the speed of murder between Rwanda and the Holocaust: between a million and 800,000 in around a hundred days, murdered “at nearly three times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust.” This claim is striking and sets the tone for the book (it is not, however, totally accurate).²

In Dave Eggers's novel about Sudan, it occurs only once, when a rumor sweeps the Kakuma refugee camp that the new fences erected for census are the prelude to "a plan like that used to eliminate Jews in Germany and Poland" (345). The Holocaust features not at all in Beah's and Iweala's work.

Despite this, I want to suggest that the Holocaust and our knowledge of the representation of the traumas and damages of those events shape and in no small part form of these African accounts of atrocity and mass death. Indeed, it may be that the forms of representation for traumatic events of this sort—in these cases, in narrative prose—are themselves shaped by Western culture's deep involvement with the after-effects of the Holocaust. If this is the case, then these texts, which are explicitly written for a Western audience, are shaped perhaps unknowingly by these influences, and this begs new questions and issues for analysis and understanding.

Authorship

One of the most obvious points of comparison between these traumatic texts about Africa and Holocaust literature concerns the interrelated issues of authorship and genre. Foucault concludes his famous essay "What Is an Author?" by suggesting that the older characteristics of the "author function" have passed, and new questions might be usefully asked:

What are the modes of existence of this discourse?
Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?
What placements are determined for possible subjects?
Who can fulfil these diverse functions of the subject? (138)

Like Holocaust testimony and other Holocaust literature, these texts pose many of these questions not in a foregrounded theoretical way, the way postmodern fiction might, for example, but simply in their construction. Rusesabagina's *An Ordinary Man* is cowritten with the reporter Tom Zoellner; Ishmael Beah's testimony is his own work, supported by his professors at Oberlin College. While Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* is a novel in a straightforward sense, Courtemanche claims *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*

is a novel. But it is also a chronicle and eyewitness report. The characters all existed in reality, and in almost every case I have used their real names. The novelist has given them lives, acts and words that summarise or symbolise what the journalist observed in their company. If I have taken the liberty of inventing a little, I have done so the better to convey the human quality of the murdered men and women (Preface n.p.).

Indeed, the novelist has done more than this to the work of the journalist: apart from changing the name of the protagonist from Gil Courtemanche to Bernard Valcourt, he describes the inner thoughts of others, scenes at which he was not present, puts monologues into the voices of the characters, fictionalizes

a diary, and so on. In addition, the dedication to Gentile—the central female character, whose fate more than anyone else’s symbolizes the violence of the genocide—implies that the author does not know if she is “dead or alive.” Yet it is very clear, and centrally important, that she dies in the main body of the text: “Gentile was dead” (248). Here, then, the role of the author and the claims to the veracity of the text, in a traditional positivist sense at least, are open to investigation. Is Courtemanche following the codes and conventions that a journalist does, or is he following the more traditional literary creative conventions? This uncertainty seems to confuse some of his claims. Almost as a counter to this is *What Is the What*, which subtitles itself as *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel by Dave Eggers*. Eggers is, of course, famous for his metafictional experimentations: his debut, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, also plays off the contrast between a novel and a memoir. Here, the preface by Valentino Achak Deng makes clear the status of the text: the “real” events are the foundation, but the rest has been novelized, “concocted” by Dave Eggers, though “it should be noted that the world I have known is not so different from the one depicted within these pages,” (Preface n.p.). The preface also makes clear the strong didactic and moral purpose of the book.

These sorts of issues and complications over the more traditional forms of authorship are well known in Holocaust studies. Some texts resolve this by foregrounding the role of the author, their relation to their own memory, and the role that, say, the historian or ghost-writer takes. These texts, especially *What Is the What*, take these issues to heart and foreground the constructed nature of the text. But these questions concern not only what the author can know and can legitimately tell but also, as it were, moral and political issues. For example, Courtemanche puts a speech into the mouth of one Cyprien who has AIDS and suspects the genocide is about to begin: he is not afraid of death, and while the Westerners want him to “talk we’re dying...I’m going to live and fuck and have a good time” (82). In contrast, Beah, captured by rebels, describes how afraid he is: “I couldn’t hear their words, because all I could think about was death. I struggled to avoid fainting” (31). Indeed, Courtemanche’s non-white African characters seem unafraid and almost lacking in agency while the non-white Africans from the others’ texts—self-authored or ghost-written—stress their fear and interiority.

While each text makes a concrete claim to its authenticity, the questions suggested by Foucault do illustrate a common theme in these works. Just as Holocaust testimonies are often aimed at those who came after the camps, all these trauma texts are aimed at the West, often the US specifically. Indeed, like many Holocaust texts, they are all diasporic; they are written by Africans or Americans resident in the West. This is clear not only from the language but also in the very nature of the authorship itself. As trauma literature, with differing forms of authorship, attention is taken from the aesthetic, strictly understood,

and from the assumed historical positivism of a documentary account and is drawn instead to the affectivity of exposure to a trauma narrative. In this way, these texts are similar to the huge number of Holocaust testimonies available: they are fascinating and upsetting but not pleasurable to read. Like Holocaust testimony, they make up a new genre, with new characteristics and, *pace* Foucault, new placements and affectivities.

Generic Characteristics

These clustered texts share some salient characteristics with much Holocaust writing. Traditionally, texts are clustered by national identity, period, or genre. Yet, in the study of Holocaust literature, the event of the Holocaust often overrides these divisions. The Holocaust was a continent-wide event and the borders—both geographic and chronological—are hard to define. Texts that concern the Holocaust are often studied beside each other to draw out complex illumination. This radical form of “drawing together,” the creation of a rhizomatic subject of study, has had a number of beneficial effects. So too, it might be useful to contrast these texts, which cover Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and an unnamed African country (reminiscent of Nigeria though it could be Sierra Leone again). I have outlined elsewhere a non-totalized selection of genre characteristics for Holocaust testimony: these include, *inter alia*, the use of discourse usually seen as historical, diverse and complex narrative framing devices, moments of epiphany, and confused time schemes (see Eaglestone, especially Chapter 2). Here I want to suggest how far these texts use these established characteristics and to reflect on what this might mean.

(a) Using “History”

Holocaust testimonies and some Holocaust fiction often break from their narrative to discuss or explain wider historical events and movements. They also have a range of metatextual support—maps, references, and so on—that the African trauma narratives also employ. Eggers’s novel offers metatextual historical information: it includes a map of Eastern Africa, and the preface (by Valentino Achak Deng, not Eggers) makes its didactic purpose clear. In contrast to many Holocaust testimonies, however, the historical situation is offered within the diegetic time of the novel, rather like product placement. A character called Dut offers a lecture, complete with a citation from historical documents, on the colonial history of Sudan (175-79), and Achak often comments on other events. The book is also dated by occasional references to world events, such as the death of Princess Diana and the attacks of 9/11; Holocaust testimonies often list the dead, too. Here the book concludes with a long list of people to be thanked, academic books that have proved useful, and a website address for Achak’s charity. Similarly, though it avoids historical lectures, *A Long Way Gone* has quite a lot of metatextual support: maps, acknowledgements,

and a historical chronology of Sierra Leone. *An Ordinary Man* has a map and a bibliography. It is also full of historical background and information that interrupts the flow of the narrative but that makes it more accessible for the less informed reader. Various passages cover accounts of world events: a section begins “Seven time zones away, in the United States” (171) and then describes the US reaction, the history of the term genocide, and America’s attempts to avoid using the word. Another section describes the Conference of Berlin in 1885 that divided up Africa and formed Rwanda. These texts explicitly aim to explain and historicize the events they narrate.

In contrast, Iweala’s novel does not offer any extraneous detail; indeed, it is not even clear what country the novel takes place in (though *Beasts of No Nation* is the name of a record from 1989 by Nigerian Afrobeat superstar Fela Kuti, suggesting a Nigerian background to the novel; also Iweala is Nigerian). This, with the dialect English and dizzying movement of the narrative, is part of the immersion that the novel wishes to achieve. Oddly, too, *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* has no support outside the text: perhaps this is because of its claim to be a novel rather than a testimony and a reflection that it is more focused on the experience of the European protagonist. Its aim, as it were, is not to reach outward to the West as an appeal but to affectively describe, in the way Wainina analyzes, in fact, the state of Rwanda before and during the genocide.

(b) Narrative Frames

Most Holocaust testimonies—though perhaps not the most celebrated—offer framing devices that structure the narrative, as do many African texts. Beah’s testimony is framed by a very short chapter set in New York in 1998: his school friends ask him about his life in Sierra Leone, little imagining that he had been pressganged as a murderous boy soldier. For them, even seeing a war is “cool” (3). Here the frame subverts what is to come. Conversely, *Beasts of No Nation*, a more traditional novel, simply begins in the confusion of a rebel attack. However, perhaps the most demanding use of a narrative frame occurs in *What Is the What*. The whole of the first book is told in flashback, as it were, while Achak is being robbed and then tied up in his (present-time) Atlanta apartment. The second book takes place during the next day and includes his visit to the hospital and his return to one of his jobs. Not only does this very unsettling frame destroy, from the beginning, any sense of narrative redemption, but it also makes clear that the US is far from the answer to the problems that Achat and his peers, the Lost Boys of Sudanese refugees and exiles, face. Indeed, while individuals are praised, the US as a whole comes out rather badly from this novel.

This is stressed further by the use of a trope quite common in Holocaust testimonies that I have named “allegories of failed understanding”: in this trope, figures not involved in the traumatic events are shown in their misreading

or incomprehension of the events involved. Charlotte Delbo's work offers a clear example of this. In "The Measure of Our Days," a section of *Auschwitz and After*, the narrator meets Pierre, the husband of her friend Marie-Louise. Pierre has an interest in the experiences of his wife and has read her notebooks. Marie-Louise says that her memories have become his and that he is more aware of some of the facts of the events than she is. However, the narrator is simply horrified by this, by Pierre's claim to memories that he cannot have, and she has to leave. Pierre becomes a figure of "failed understanding," that is, a measure of the impossibility of understanding the events, a measure of the gap between the survivors and the others and so, in turn, of the gap between the readers and the survivors/authors. It is an allegory of the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event. In *What Is the What*, this reoccurs, but in a subtly different way that does not focus on the incomprehensibility: early on, Achak writes, "When I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories...to people who wronged me...I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. *You do not understand*, I would tell them. *You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen*" (32). Indeed, throughout, he addresses people silently in order to tell them his story: a child belonging to the robbers who tie him up, a receptionist at the hospital, and the members of the health club at which he works are all silently told part of his story, and each is addressed like this. Each is seen as unwilling to grasp the events whereas, in contrast, the widespread community of the Sudanese diaspora—in contact by mobile phone and web—is seen as supportive and understanding.

This touches on a very significant difference between the vast majority of Holocaust testimonies and these texts: in these African texts, there is little sense of "smothered words." This is the term that the philosopher and second-generation survivor Sarah Kofman uses to describe the aporia that lies between the inability of Holocaust survivors to put into words the evil they survived—its traumatic breakage of the very possibility of narrative—and their feeling of duty and often compulsion to do so, which would in fact reshape the events into a comprehensible narrative. She writes: "If no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to bear witness. But how? How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story?" (36). The accounts are "smothered words," which both "say" and "unsay" the events. These accounts of African trauma, however, offer a different approach to this. There is no sense that the events themselves, while awful, are actually incomprehensible, as is so often claimed for Holocaust testimony. Indeed, the opposite is claimed. In the closing pages of Imre Kertész's Holocaust novel *Fateless*, Gyuri, the survivor, meets a journalist eager to write about the camps. But after some conversation, the journalist "covered his face with his hands" and declares that the camp cannot be imagined: "so, that must be why they prefer to talk about hell instead" (250),

thinks Gyuri. In the African texts, whether a conventional novel like *Beasts of No Nation*, or a novelized testimony, or a straightforward testimony, there is a real sense that there can be comprehension, that a story must be told and can and should be grasped by others in the West. Indeed, the end of Iweala's novel consists of his learning to enunciate his story. More movingly, the second half of Beah's testimony concerns his care at Benin Home, where he learns to work through his trauma and to narrate his testimony, and then the account moves on to his retelling of his and others' stories to the wider world, mainly in the US. Eggers, writing Achak, states: "Be grateful, TV boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighborhood, and now see the woman screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me" (72). The final sentence sums up both the didactic purpose and the implicit comprehensibility of the events Eggers is describing.

The reasons for this significant difference are hard to pin down. Of course, if the traumatic events were discussed as incomprehensible, as the Holocaust often is, then the books would undermine themselves: Iweala's novel would be trapped in an aporia, Eggers's method would seem futile (and, like Pierre in Delbo's work, rather insulting), and all Beah's work would seem to be wasted. As in Holocaust narrative, there is a sense that the story must be told. But perhaps here there is also a more burning political need. As the news daily reminds us, and notwithstanding the view of Africa that Wainaina criticizes, many of these sorts of events are continuing. Without anyone grasping them, perhaps nothing can be done. These works are "engaged literature" in a renewed Sartrean sense; that is, they are not simply affective works: they are also aimed explicitly at pricking Western consciences.

(c) *Moments of Epiphany*

Holocaust texts often have moments of epiphany. Perhaps the most celebrated of these moments of epiphany occurs in Levi's testimony: reaching for an icicle to quench his thirst, a guard snatches it away: "'Warum?' I asked him in my poor German. 'Hier ist kein warum' ('there is no why here')" (35). This moment reveals to Levi the unreasoning and irrational nature of the death camps. These texts make use of tropes that are similar to the ones found in Holocaust testimony. The protagonist's first killing in *Beast of No Nation* (25-26) marks one such event, and Beah's testimony is full of worse and worse horrors that reveal Beah's condition to himself. *What Is the What* sounds as if it is built around an epiphany (the what), but in fact, the what constantly escapes. It might be the return of Dinkaland to itself (126) or the protagonist's growth and success (456), but it is never really clear. Indeed, just as Eggers avoids a redemptive conclusion, so he avoids a cliché of discovery: just as in his first book, the process—open-ended, painful, often filled with delusion and error—is the focus of the narrative. While there are many moments of terror and showing, there is no one unifying vision.

(d) *Confused Time Schemes*

Another feature of many Holocaust testimonies is the slip in the diegetic level of the text: there are slips in time, interruptions to the narrative flow in the form of historical accounts, things the protagonist could not have known at the time but learnt later, explanations, and so on. These are reproduced in all these texts and are so prevalent that they might be considered almost ubiquitous in texts that deal with traumatic events. *Beasts of No Nation* begins *in medias res*, then flashes backwards to cover the past. Both Eggers's and Beah's books begin, in terms of form, in the US and then flashback to the past. Beah's use of flashback is especially interesting: the most vivid accounts of the atrocities in which he participated are offered during the narrative in which he is recounting precisely his recovery from the psychological damage of being a boy soldier. In this way, the text echoes the accounts of trauma that stress that the events are not experienced as they happen but only afterwards, in fragmentary and broken ways, as the self struggles to work through and reintegrate itself. Rusesabagina's text, too, moves about in time, as it covers the genocide and its context in relation to his own life narrative.

Conclusion

These five texts, which witness awful events taking place in the aftermath of colonialism and Empire, aim to offer this experiential account of writing. This is not a full taxonomy, and, more importantly, it is not meant to suggest these texts are written in imitation of Holocaust testimonies. It does mean to say, though, that the cultural tools for representing terrible atrocities to and in the West, in English, echo or parallel each other. Some psychologists argue that these tools or codes stem from the experience of trauma itself; however, it seems more likely that these tools and codes are the conventions by which trauma is recognized in literary representation in the West (see among others, BenEzer and Herman). This is an undecidable aporia. However, there are illuminating congruencies between discourses about the Holocaust and about genocide, atrocity, and trauma in Africa that might be further explored.

Robert Young writes that "[p]ostcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world; the politics of anti-colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain" (11). He goes on to argue that postcolonial texts offer ways to understand how "colonialism was experienced, or analysed, by those who suffered its effects" (64). These five texts, which witness awful events taking place in the aftermath of colonialism and Empire, aim to offer this. However, as scholars have learnt from Holocaust studies, such witnessing is complex, positioned, structured by generic concerns, and interwoven with a range of other discourses. Moreover, and in addition to these, as it were, internal textual complexities, these texts are already problematic in terms of the politics of representation: they are about Africa, but all directly address the

West, especially the US. A harsh critic might easily accuse them of offering a voyeuristic opportunity or of colonizing atrocity. It is true that they criticize the West: Rusesabagina's and Courtemanche's texts both offer a clear-sighted view of colonial history; Eggers's makes clear that the US is no safe haven and that global indifference to Sudanese disasters is enacted on the level of personal interactions. However, these critiques are located in an English-speaking, Western-facing context that reduces the force of the critique. The same harsh critic might also suggest that the focus on the personal reduces a wider engagement with the political and global issues. Perhaps such views of these testimonies miss the point: the texts are forms of engaged literature that seek to influence, explain, and educate. This explains the implicit conception in each text that the events, the "what," are communicable and can be put into narratives. In these complexities—the need to speak and the immediate difficulties that speaking raises—these texts further echo Holocaust testimony. One key area where they differ is that many of the scandals they discuss—the atrocities in Sudan, for example—are continuing, which makes both their need to communicate and their engagement even more vital.

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NOTES

¹ See, for useful and developed starting points, Gilroy; Moses, "Conceptual Blockages" and *Genocide and Settler Society*; Stone; Moses and Stone; Zimmerer.

² As Christopher Browning suggests, between fifty and sixty per cent of the victims of the Holocaust were murdered in a "short, intense wave of mass murder" between March 1942 and February 1943, and this itself excludes many others murdered in that time (xv). Indeed, this raises questions of definition, of dating (the Holocaust's beginning—1933? 1939? 1941?—its end), and so on. To point this out is not to try to trump one genocide with another but rather to illustrate the complexities that immediately arise when contrasts and comparisons are made. Gourevitch mentions the Holocaust again as a comparison of efficiency (96) in relation to the UN's genocide convention and the US's lack of action (149ff), in connection with reconciliation (240); at a moment of outrage he says, "Rwanda had presented the world with the most unambiguous case of genocide since Hitler's war against the Jews, and the world had sent blankets, beads and bandages to camps controlled by the killers, apparently hoping that everyone would behave nicely in the future" (170). Indeed, his outrage is rightly focused on both the inaction and the willful—colonial—ignorance of the Western powers and media, who confuse Hutus and Tutsis and blame innate "savagery" rather than analyze the situation.

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