



READING OUR RUINS: Post-colonial stories that float from afar

By Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor



Mea maxima culpa. I have not engaged with the idea of the *post-colonial* before. Not overtly. I didn't notice it, you see. And that is the politest way of putting it. But I have heard about it in dribs and drabs, as one hears about people from a distant and fascinating culture that point at the moon before they start a meal. I wondered if I should amplify the retelling of the big stories you know so well: the 1884-5 Berlin Conference, a euphemism for a cynical collusion by the then-powerful nations to launch wars under banners to justify a violent land grab of a continent from its nations and people, the causal reality and root of an epoch that would eventually settle under the label of "post-colonial". I wanted to understand how to tell post-colonial in a reality where narratives to explain the use of extreme and murderous violence on nations, cultures and peoples are still written without consequences by the same forces responsible for the long war and occupation season now known as the colonial period.

Yet for the most part, today we assert our "post-coloniality" and frolic in its imagined sounds, lyrics and images to the rhythm of assorted independence anthems. But independence from what precisely? What distinguishes *colonialities* when the existential violence visited on entire peoples and nations remain unexorcised, unquestioned, unnamed? The infrastructure and systems of the aberration in human relationships that is the accepted "colonial experience" have mostly remained intact. For the most part, in African countries, amidst the debris of the uneasy post-coloniality, the

ancient and unassailable structures are those that channel Africa's raw material (not its human) resources to leave nations; the diamonds and dying miners are African, the profits are unquestionably European and American to this day.

What distinguishes *colonialities* when the existential violence visited on entire peoples and nations remain unexorcised, unquestioned, unnamed?

This is a survey of ruins. It co-opts the ruin (paraphrasing [Christopher Woodward](#)) as a realm of "dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator/observer". Ruins, created by acts of time and/or violence are, also, arguably, the material equivalent of that most compelling and equalising of human presences, a corpse. There is an oft-quoted sign in Latin installed in the doorway of many morgues: "Here is the place that death rejoices to teach the living." The forensic pathology processes and options that invite such lessons begin with a word that I have become excessively fond of, and feel should have wider and wilder use: **autopsy**. Autopsy, means to *see for oneself*. It invites the human being to a humble inhabiting of a situation in order to speak from a place of experience, observation and encounter. Within "autopsy" are notions of a naked, visceral going deep to witness and access unseen perspectives that reveal another facet of the truth about the human condition.

There. That is my excuse for poking into intangible holes, including the holes of and in memory - to see for myself the unseen "post-colonial" story. To speak post-coloniality is to seek to address a corpse that has somehow managed to perpetuate its existence through an unending drawing out of its juices by assorted and mostly external parties. Those who have to inhabit its being are like those numerous creatures that make a corpse a thriving Cosmopolis. The ruins I explore with you include the embodied ones that pass down generations and cultures looking for a reckoning and acknowledgment—a witnessing. I scour these ruins in the hope of a more complete vocabulary of past, future, present, of me, of us, of other, of Kenya, of Africa, of the Commonwealth, of the world.

We children were privy to our parents' private conversations of denial and heartbreak; we glimpsed the public happy face, the stiff upper lips, the wounded collective body, the private griefs of so many denials of excellence because someone in authority objected to their creed, their race, their tribe, their way of speaking, their history or their leader.

The prevailing world lexicon is incapable of naming and bearing all our immense nows. We circle each other with old, small and weary words to speak to and about our realities, words that fall short of all our experiencing, our feeling, our hurting, and our hoping. The prevailing lexicon is also subject to ruin- making forces and is incapable of diagnosing its own inadequacies.

Fortunately, there are poets like Warsan Shire among us who [point a way](#):

*later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere everywhere everywhere."*

And now an examination of a sliver from the results of an informal post-colonial autopsy session: I was born in post-independence Kenya. I was mostly formed by the season of the phase that Achille

Mbembe, in his paper "[Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive](#)" refers to as the post-colonial "negative moment". My Kenya story (apart from a bleep of luminosity in the asylum in 2002) is that of an unending cycle of hoping for a glimpse of the proverbial Canaan followed by crushing disillusionment.

In 1969, I was a few months old when my parents had to flee at night from their first post-independence home in Limuru, in what is called the Central Province of Kenya, after all our lives were threatened by a state-sanctioned neo-Mau Mau gang who objected to our family's ethnic origins following the state-anointed murder of the Minister of Economic Planning, Tom Mboya. My late father would only say very many years later that we were the lucky ones. He did not qualify his statement; it was sufficient to read the terrible bleakness in his eyes.

A baby probably holds the sensations and effects of a dangerous season. The story of my unease with Kenya's post-colonial experiment started then, with an undercurrent of consciousness that the state could eradicate your family and culture and guarantee your non-belonging for spurious and intangible reasons that play out to this day. I grew up surrounded by the suppressed and whispered disappointments of my parents' generation; they were the witnesses of the escalating betrayals of independence dreams, the refusal by leaders to lead new citizens to the promised land. Instead these leaders moved in to occupy the deserted palaces, acres, factories and farms that the colonial governorship had held, seizing for themselves mines and beach fronts and using the same forces of violence and alienation to achieve their purpose.

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Our morally wounded post-colonial elders gingerly tread the silences of the ruins of so many nation-building dreams. There is no space within the fractures to whisper the names of their failures, the shame of betrayals, the rejection by one's own people, the horrible realisation that the face of the demon that kills, maims, destroys and consumes is ours.

My most abiding experience of the meaning of independence was when as a child, our house help, my sisters and I hid in fear, trembling under the living room sofas as outside, above the skies, Kenya Air Force planes screeched past and army tankers rolled by on roads, the independent state displaying its power and threatening its own citizens after the tortured and brutalised body of yet another luminous minister, J.M. Kariuki, had been found. This home-grown brutalisation of inconvenient bodies and behaviour continues to this day. It now targets the ordinary citizen. A lawyer named Willy Kimani, his taxi driver and his bicycle taxi-owning client walk out of court and turn up bound, gagged and drowned. In the post-colony it is an offence to dare to seek truth, justice and hope. You do not call the overlord's exposed bum "nakedness".

So where and when does colonial becomes post-colonial when the inheritors of a state who perform independence are of your race? When those who perpetuate offensive systems and refuse to unmake the violence are of your culture? When the ones who rob other peoples of their land and resources are of your creed? And when those who oppress, marginalise and socially and economically exclude amplify their monopoly of violence to legitimise control, and evolve ethno-chauvinistic supremacy narratives to excuse their plunder are your compatriots? What is the resolution of the story offered to the post-colonial citizen when those who offend and afflict are of her earth and hearth? Is it to

make excuses for the disordered state of the nation because the chaos makers are our own?

We, the children of the immediate “post-colonial” have inherited our parents’ delusions and the ceaseless circling of the scene of the crime—this is not a metaphor; this is a metonym for “nation”. The Hobbesian mindscapes post-colonial frontline elders imagined they could conceal from us are ours now.

True, there are those among us who have been invested in to perpetuate the illusions, and are groomed to take over the seats at the lever of the ghastly “ancien régime”. Meanwhile, many more wrestle with and are bruised by the phantoms of our relationships with the imagination of sovereignty, nation, citizen and state. We are called to scream our defence of something that has no faith in us, no loyalty, no interest, and quite frankly, outside of the tourist brochure, no meaning. Our morally wounded post-colonial elders gingerly tread the silences of the ruins of so many nation-building dreams. There is no space within the fractures to whisper the names of their failures, the shame of betrayals, the rejection by one’s own people, the horrible realisation that the face of the demon that kills, maims, destroys and consumes is ours.

Meanwhile, the post-post-colonial, mostly technologically savvy generation - those post-independence parents’ grandchildren - have, for the most part, opted out and stopped believing in God or nation. Weary of waiting for nirvana, many post-post-colonials have fled the crime scene to restart lives elsewhere; and without a sense of irony, that elsewhere is more likely than not the country of the architects and designers of the-colony-that-became-a-nation - Great Britain, France, Belgium, or Canada, Australia, the United States, the lands of eternal alienation and occupation. Many post-post-colonials take steps to obtain a second passport. They know that when anthems have quieted, and fireworks fade, and patriotic noises accompanied by the prerequisite outrage at the numerous badness and madness of “former colonial masters” have been exhausted, more often than not, to be left to confront the reality of what is imagined as home is also to contend with compromise, disappointment and decay, a stasis of order, dreams, ambitions, imagination, future and community.

Many post-colonials leave “home” to seek and find the unrealised ideal of belonging. The home left behind can then become rosier, better, softer and prettier the further one is from it. You see, away, there are no genocidal bogeymen. Leaving is liberation from unrequited yearning for a country called home. Those of us who still stay do so with the knowledge that we breathe uneasy in the national wounds daily anaesthetised by a debilitating hope for a nation. Yet in our lunatic faith, we are made co-conspirators in a collective existential traumatic drama. We listen, paralysed, to puerile and stupid conversations that are painted with a nationalistic hue.

An example. A few months ago, in a narrative that was amplified during the last election season, this lot now entrusted with keeping Kenya’s national dreams alive occupied their private-school educated minds with contemplating how much more a man was rendered more male and more virile - and, therefore, properly anointed by God - for leadership by virtue of the existence or lack thereof of a foreskin. This mulling was done in a public arena and explored with immense emotion in both traditional and social media across generations. Is it a wonder that post-colonial women such as I must now wonder how and where to situate ourselves in a realm of such erudite musings? Moreover, who knew that when the Union Jack was lowered in Nairobi in 1963, almost sixty years later, the great post-independence Kenyan imagination would be exercised by a public contemplation of the state of men’s willies?

How many of our post-independence belongings here are forged by similar roilings?

I have no memory of halcyon days. Halcyon moments, yes: like reading *Anne of Green Gables* or

reciting Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* in Nairobi's July cold. But I do not recall halcyon days. The undercurrent of unease and barely suppressed impending violence is the theme song of my post-colonial being. So where exactly is the line of delineation between colonial and post-colonial? It was certainly not drawn at that midnight point when the Union Jack was lowered and another flag was hoisted under fire-lit skies.

In Kenya, I suspect that our post-colonial discomforts are caused not only by unresolved antagonisms and competing myths about who has the right to rule a horribly incompetent but brutal deep state that evolved out of the cynical manipulation of post-independence hopes, but also by a most uninspiring emotion: *ennui*.

In Kenya recently, the post-colonial project was placed under a microscope. On Saturday, March 26, 2016, a columnist's heading pronounced: "[*Kenya is a Cruel Marriage; It's Time We Talk Divorce.*](#)" Public intellectual and economist Dr. David Ndi's type of questioning is taking place elsewhere in so many forms. The post-colonial hot soup in a world wounded by the omnipotence of global corporations and the rise of demagogues like Le Pen and Donald Trump, where the very odd Nigel Farage proclaims Brexit Day as Britain's Independence Day. As an aside, it was in England that I was informed that to say "post-colonial" was to refer to the rest of us, not to Britain. It was in 2000 that I suggested, a bit mischievously, that Britain was a post-colonial state suffering from the pangs of having had, loved and lost its colonies/conquered states.

In Kenya, I suspect that our post-colonial discomforts are caused not only by unresolved antagonisms and competing myths about who has the right to rule a horribly incompetent but brutal deep state that evolved out of the cynical manipulation of post-independence hopes, but also by a most uninspiring emotion: *ennui*. The citizens' riot for rights thing? Storming the Bastille? Done. Devolving power? Done. Democracy through ballot magic? Done. With new technology, the process is so hackable that the winner of the next election can be programmed in the year of a present election cycle. A revised, celestial constitution to save us from ourselves? Enshrined. Yet the threat of extreme violence and election-related deaths, like unholy ritual sacrifices, persists. The idea of nation and state in Kenya has turned into an albatross. And this, the previously unimaginable idea, has emerged. Ndi's article offers us a consideration of the end of Project Kenya, as the historian Professor Ogot had previously suggested. Ndi uses this Gikuyu phrase: *Reke tumwano*: Let us divorce. In other words: let us unplug ourselves from this thing already.

The public reaction has been mostly that of catatonic shock, screeching, but also a sort of resignation. Ndi's article is still being referenced in so many forums— including this one. Yet in that proposition, there is a hint of grief, the reality of having to abort the stillborn dreams of a nation. To be invited to contemplate the loss of the national project is terrifying. We have grown accustomed to the fiction of its life and prefer to confuse the frenzy of movement within it with progress.

Visiting Britain does not necessarily clarify post-coloniality: in its dazzling capacity for amnesia or re-patterning of memory, the mnemonics of the histories of our encounters and attempt to dialogue with it must fall away. The preferred conversations, if they happen, tend to be from within the lexicon of the fig leaf of "development", "Third World" and "participatory paradigms" on the one hand, and the character of corruption or AIDS in "Africa", on the other. For the ex-premier David Cameron, to be able to ingenuously tut-tut about Afghanistan's and Nigeria's corruption is case enough for a desperate requirement for the UK to undertake what Catholics would call "an examination of conscience".

Few blink at the fact of a world that has turned human suffering into a complex economy. Instead we accept euphemisms: “Guantanamo Bay”, not American concentration camp crafted to incorporate elements from Auschwitz, including medical experiments on humans; “collateral damage”, not the wholesale slaughter of innocent people; “military contractors”, not predatory war scavengers.

Serendipitously, I came across [a short article](#) that is worth reading in full, in which Neil MacGregor, the former head of the British Museum now helping to create a German equivalent in Berlin, interviewed by the *Guardian*'s Tim Adams, spoke of memory, atrocity, history and remembering. He noted other important things, and I quote:

“The thing I find striking is that in the centre of Berlin you keep coming across monuments to national shame. I think that is unique in the world. ... There is still no appetite to look hard at British behaviour in Ireland. What I find so painfully admirable about the German experience is that they are determined to find the historical truth and acknowledge it, however painful it is. You can't be an informed adult - or an artist - in Germany without doing that.”

On drawing our attention to the deeds of Islamic State today and its connection with the habits of nations, he observes: *“At one level, the IS destruction has been about just shocking the world and terror. But part of it has been the deliberate reordering of history that is common to all wars.”*

I suggest that the real First World War did not occur in 1914, but in 1884-5 after the so-called Berlin Conference whose amphitheatres were the countries and peoples of the world upon whom war was declared under the guise of the export of civilisation and values — I think it is called the export of democracy these days— to independent peoples, the majority of whom fought back hard and were then defeated, occupied, and restructured. The lexicon of the reasons the National Socialists used to wage war on and conquer Europe is not dissimilar to that used to justify the war on nations facilitated by the Berlin conference; and is not dissimilar to the phrases and words that are used today to justify invasions of sovereign states: regime change, democracy, collateral damage, sharing our values, removal of dictators, saving the people, mission accomplished.

Given the blood and shadows among our nations that remain unacknowledged, the clattering of the bones of shared ghosts, it remains a puzzle how the architects of the trials in Nuremberg that put Germany and its World War II conscience on trial, are still unable to delve within and memorialise the horrid dimensions of their own engagement with the world.

The post-colonial state, for the most part, has merely systematised and perpetuated the long arc of violence on peoples, resources and nations. The habit of hagiography and whitewashing of grubby deeds by the state is entrenched in many of the nations represented here: concentration camps, detaining opponents, extra-judicial murders, arbitrary slaughters, mass displacement of peoples, cultural and religious impositions, disappearances. Does the post-colonial creature admit to being infused by a specific wounding linked to the character of the nation? Would the post-colonial confess to inheriting relationships with absences, loss, the missing, the unspoken, the defeated, and the dead? Given this, is to be post-colonial to live the fall-outs from century-old wars that have never really been acknowledged or called off?

Today, we humans are living in a season of frenzy for the control of diminishing resources in a progressively overheating world; we are witnessing the rise and rise of opaque and abhorrent transnationals who roam the world unfettered, like Satans looking for anything to devour. We are in a world that demands the diminution and commodification of humanity. We know the games of bloodthirsty gods of war turning our landscapes into infernos, all offered in slick messaging that

shows how cool it is that humanity can destroy itself. We tolerate asymmetric wars and war-vulture enterprises — the idea that one set of humans justify the destruction of civilisations for the purposes of growing their home economies by, among other things, securing reconstruction contracts, is a scene that comes straight out of hell.

To misquote my new compatriots, “We live in interesting times.” But think about it; maybe in most of Africa, to be post-colonial is to be Chinese.

Few blink at the fact of a world that has turned human suffering into a complex economy. Instead we accept euphemisms: “Guantanamo Bay”, not American concentration camp crafted to incorporate elements from Auschwitz, including medical experiments on humans; “collateral damage”, not the wholesale slaughter of innocent people; “military contractors”, not predatory war scavengers. We are co-opted by media outlets who frame narratives to excuse intentional evil, like the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya, and then squirm in silence at the abhorrent murders of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi under the banners of justice and democracy.

Regime Change is good, we tell ourselves and comfort ourselves with the assurance that the International Criminal Court is reserved for only brown, black and Eastern European villains. Even after [the Chilcot report](#), it is unlikely that Tony Blair will be tried for extreme crimes against humanity. From there it is a small step to demonising migrants escaping wars created to feed flailing world economies. We now outsource murder to machines to appease putrid conscience. No one is responsible for the desecrated corpses of a hundred million nameless, mostly black- and brown-hued peoples stranded on far-away beaches. Our oppression of nature persists; the weather has changed and the large tuskers are facing extinction. We know that our human moral infrastructure is gutted, but treat those who demand a new ethical imagination as fruitcake heretics. As old certainties die, nobody seems to know what to say or do. Our lexicon is shattered by the weight of what we have become. But frankly, before the terrible witness of this epoch, silence is probably the most informed position.

A secondary character has now entered our post-colonial fray. The “Better Africa Future” set pieces are now being constructed in or by China. Given this reality, and I suspect the situation is not too dissimilar in other places of the world, the more accepted greeting is “Ni hao.” Please do not read me the wrong way; I am an awestruck admirer of China and the vision it has realised for itself. My concern is that a manual for becoming Sino-African has not yet been developed. Should we form a club where we can exchange confidences in Mandarin? Despite the reality of 1.5 million new influential African citizens of Chinese origin, which we are all still rather shy to talk about, if the future of Africa is written in Beijing skies what does this mean for the life of the Commonwealth in Africa? There is no point protesting: the bastion has been breached. No shots were fired.

China built the African Union headquarters. All they did was hand over the keys to our erstwhile kings. It is impressive, this Chinese phallic symbol piercing African skies. To misquote my new compatriots, “We live in interesting times.” But think about it; maybe in most of Africa, to be post-colonial is to be Chinese.

Unacknowledged evil perpetuates itself and extends its diabolic presence, sometimes in seemingly innocuous ways; ways that are not and would never have been accommodated if the desecrated, wounded and broken bodies had not been black.

A brief ode to Commonwealth-ness, especially after Brexit: I am from Nairobi. We do clubs. I am not

an uninfluenced observer. We love clubs. The more Great Britain-connected, the better. Clubs are a community-creating process for us. We understand the indispensability of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. tea. Being Commonwealth is a secure space to soothe the occasional sweet anguish of nostalgia for might-have-been pasts and could-have-been futures. With the Commonwealth we can pretend that we are important to the world and our admonitions cause a pause in the flow of world history. We even observe other people's elections draped in our Commonwealth mantles of dignified neutrality. To be Commonwealth is to set apart our Englishes from those of the United States of America. There we adjust to the *how-now-brown-cow* English variety in order to bewilder them. It amuses us when they ask us to translate "dustbin" or "pavement". When they ask, as they invariably will, why you speak English as you do, it is the single time one admits with a touch of vanity that "*we were colonised by the English*".

I know Boris Johnson had some illusion that by leaving the European Union, the Commonwealth glory may reassert itself, and those nations who call themselves Commonwealth shall bask in its restored gaze. Even though the old house is hollow and decaying, it is, however, a remarkable wreck. Old and new skeletons clutter its numerous sealed vaults, rusted pipes leak, some not-of-English-imperial-origin nations have been allowed in, the Booker Prize has been pawned to the rest of the world, the velvet is thin and frayed, and some members would like their crown jewels back, cobwebs gather amidst the bat dung and the butlers have not been paid their wages. Visits to the mother country are no longer free, and few in the world know why we exist.

I spoke earlier of crime scenes; our Commonwealth has not yet conversed with its ghosts, has it? At some point we will have to stand face to face and inhale each others' fetid breaths and tolerate the stench and not flinch at our mutual suffering. At some point we will try again to hold each others' gaze and struggle together to retrieve the human being from the debris of wars fought and lost, of unsigned armistices. We need to talk, really talk, about the things we need to talk about in a world failing with such violence to make sense of itself.

Here are the ruins of the post-colonial states scattered abroad - so many unwanted and destitute bodies, exports of the pathology of nations exposed for all to see. They are not far from the Mediterranean gravesite of many freely offered dark-skinned bodies that neither the Commonwealth nor the post-colonial African Union have bothered to mention, mourn or note, as if relieved that at least these have done themselves in.

Perhaps, then, to be post-colonial is also to adhere to the notion of "place as palimpsest", we are occupants of "multiple realities in one moment". *Ruins*. These are palimpsests, matrices for imagining and re-imagining realities, I think.

I will start easy. From Kinshasa, DRC. Two people meet. Heads touch.

"Mbote," They might say.

The history of this gesture comes from a legacy of ruins by the world's most foremost genocidaire and architect of atrocities, with his sidekick Henry Morton Stanley, whose atrocities have not been recorded in our world. No memorials to a catastrophe. No literature by and of doomed descendants. No descriptions of how a great and beloved kingdom was turned into a demonic abyss by a man and his nation who went on to industrialise human exploitation, murder, horror, anguish and suffering in the quest for matter.

The [German scholar Patrick Hoenig](#) noted, in a conversation I shared with him, how the abiding monument to the apocalypse that became the Congo are systems built to lead outward; everything of

the infinitely wealthy Congo is up for grabs and the infrastructure to send these out, come war or high water, remain intact. I suggested to a journalist in a fit of pique that the refusal of the world to respond with abhorrence and outrage to the witness of human evil that was Leopold's and Belgium's Congo, despite photographic evidence of such abhorrent and unrepeated evil, helped sow the seeds of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Unacknowledged evil perpetuates itself and extends its diabolic presence, sometimes in seemingly innocuous ways; ways that are not and would never have been accommodated if the desecrated, wounded and broken bodies had not been black.

The Antwerpse handjes (biscuits or chocolates made in the shape of a hand) are the only [un-ironic memorials](#) to thirty million still-nameless citizens of the Kongo Kingdom who were murdered, chopped, incinerated, petrified. Only these chocolate frivolities speak to what evil befell our humanity through them. Otherwise there is nothing else. Not even a placard in the DRC. I am not an academic, so forgive my question if it is foolish, but what is the point of knowledge sought and acquired if it cannot infuse transformation at the site of its engagement? The so-called plantation concessions from Leopold's era are in the hands of multinationals like Canada's Feronia. The attitudes and behaviour of the new landowners, we are informed, are a continuation of the past and remain, again, uninterrogated. I ask: Is this where one will find the line that demarcates the colonial from the post-colonial?

A final ruin. On March 2015, I was part of a group of residents of the Rockerfeller Centre in Bellagio, Northern Italy, who had taken a day out in the very wealthy city of Como. In the piazza, amidst the contented citizens and goggle-eyed tourists, were post-colonials from Pakistan selling shirts, post-colonials from India selling selfie sticks, post-colonials from Nigeria being pimped by UNICEF to hawk images of African children with flies in their eyes, and post-colonials from Senegal offering Hare Krishna pamphlets on one side and Jehovah Witness materials on another. There was a post-colonial from Ghana selling food in a stall and five other post-colonial brothers from West Africa begging—the only beggars in Como. As a fishmonger muttered to one in our group: “Before the Africans, no beggars.”

Here are the ruins of the post-colonial states scattered abroad - so many unwanted and destitute bodies, exports of the pathology of nations exposed for all to see. They are not far from the Mediterranean gravesite of many freely offered dark-skinned bodies that neither the Commonwealth nor the post-colonial African Union have bothered to mention, mourn or note, as if relieved that at least these have done themselves in. Or maybe it is far too soul-shattering to have to confront the question of why the liberated African citizens would rather endure the seventy per cent chance of death than go through another day living under the glow of an enlightened post-colonial leadership. It would lead to far too many uncomfortable acknowledgments, wouldn't it? To be post-colonial is to fake it, no?

There are scattered pieces of a story that beg to be seen and gathered in order to offer us a word that can shelter our unseen, unstated, unnamed experiences. There are stories beneath the stories we have heard and assumed to be true even though they sit oddly with reality and truth. There are stories in and of the in-between.

Anyway, as we traversed the cobbled streets of Como, my armpits were wet, my head lowered as if at any point I might be asked to explain Africa, our people, or why our most beautiful men were crouched in European corners playing the monkey to get a few coins. I wanted to assert, *I am Kenyan*. We don't leave home. We don't do exile. As I crossed the city in my special little group made up of an Indian artist, four white American professionals, a South Africa-based German scholar, also white, I happened upon another able-bodied African male - dark, tall, dreadlocked and with the face

and large, dark eyes of a tragic Bob Marley, accosting people on the street, begging with aggression. I hastened my feet to speed away faster than the others, my eyes averted. Until from behind me he howled: "Sister from Africa, look at me. Please. Sister, look at me. Sister from Africa, see me!"

What do you want me to say? That I stopped?

That I looked back and saw a man? I didn't.

I hurried on.

I did glance at shop displays, the back of my neck burning. He annoyed me. I needed his cry to be for someone else, not me.

None of our group mentioned that moment or man again. Yet, as you can see now, the man and his voice remain unforgotten.

The ghosts pursued me back to the continent where his voice was born. His words remain fresh, a public witness-bearing, in spite of my refusal to acknowledge the vision of my post-colonial woundedness revealed in a European public square. In his cry is a harsh invitation to dare to see for oneself, to look beyond the surface performance, name the unnameable, find the human being. So here is a slide without words for him. It is in the colour (brown, I think), that dreams choose when they fall apart.

There are still far too many fragments in the telling of our being, gaps in the soul and in the reading of our lives. There is an excess of ideas received without re-interrogations. There are scattered pieces of a story that beg to be seen and gathered in order to offer us a word that can shelter our unseen, unstated, unnamed experiences. There are stories beneath the stories we have heard and assumed to be true even though they sit oddly with reality and truth. There are stories in and of the in-between.

In reading ruins in imitation of those who look into stars and entrails for prognostications, I strain to see these for myself — these small autopsies — so that I might hear the memory of a past releasing its real name to the present and in the sound, the echo that speaks forth a future that suggests the best of us.

Amidst these figurative ruins, "there be corpses that rejoice to teach the living". "See me!" - that invitation from a man, a body, on a far-off street - is a good enough place for me to look in a way that I could not before.

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