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The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 4(3), pp 382–397 September 2017.
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Memory and the Popular: Rwanda in Mukoma Wa Ngugi's Fiction

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This essay locates the valences of the popular in Mukoma Wa Ngugi's fiction to understand how Rwanda as a background for a thriller fits into a longer tradition of African popular genres that represent the aftermath of violent conflict. The question of whether Nairobi Heat *and* Black Star Nairobi *attempt to illuminate the genocide or only evoke it as background shapes the approach to the popular. The essay then identifies ways in which Mukoma's novels are also in conversation with the more canonical works of anticolonial "writing back" to empire and in fact perform an* unnarration, *or blotting out, of that discourse and the historical dynamics that inform it. Mukoma does not divorce himself entirely from this older literary project, which exercises a disruptive influence in the popular as he configures it. Finally, the essay examines the relation among action, morality, and sentimentality to identify how Mukoma reclaims the plot of intervention from the humanitarian framing of the failure of international intervention.*

Keywords: Mukoma Wa Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, Rwanda genocide, genre fiction in Africa, human rights

What do we make of the popular treatment of major traumatic events such as the Rwanda genocide, especially if the genocide is placed as a background to a genre fiction that occupies the forefront? Rwanda dictates a historical logic to Mukoma's *Nairobi Heat*[1] and *Black Star Nairobi*[2] that merits analysis but risks being read as already familiar. The arc of narrative from *Nairobi Heat* through its sequel recasts the public identities created by the genocide and its politics of remembrance, and exposes consequences to the genocide not previously imagined. Moreover, for Mukoma, crime fiction presents an opportunity to explore "very extreme situations" in ways that

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1 Mukoma Wa Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat* (New York: Melville House, 2010).

2 Mukoma Wa Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi* (New York: Melville House, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

exceed limits placed on realist fiction.[3] The genre, therefore, can be said to lift constraints on action, creating improbable circumstances that showcase the agency of Mukoma's characters.[4] If, however, the emphasis on action is revelatory on the one hand, might treating the Rwanda genocide as familiar on the other be obfuscating? The shifting placement of the genocide between background and foreground calibrates exposure and concealment, usefully reclaiming the genocide's aftermath from the international narrative of failed intervention but casting other dimensions of the historical context in the shadows.

Before we turn to the dynamic of perspective in the novels (the calibration of foreground and background), it behooves us to situate the popular in relation to serious, historical subjects more generally. The *popular* is a vexed term, especially as it relates to the concept of the people. Karin Barber cautions us against using the European model because "the people in Africa are a heterogeneous, fluctuating conglomeration of ethnic, regional, religious, and class groups. What pertains to the people, therefore, is inevitably and continually open to reinterpretation."[5] The popular in Africa tends to be located in juxtaposition either to the "traditional" or the "elite," and is at risk as a "shapeless, residual category."[6] Building from Barber's insight of the unstable borders of the popular, Jane Bryce recognizes that " 'genre fiction' is almost a synonym for popular fiction" in Africa, but urges a recognition for a broader body of literature that sits somewhere in between the "canonical and popular." These "nonstandard narratives" are distinguishable by the types of experiences they tackle: "the perspectives of child soldiers, sex workers, and beer drinkers."[7] Bryce is resisting the pejorative sense of popular noted by Stuart Hall, where the popular is understood as the marketable, or commercially successful.[8] To see the choice to write genre fiction as a strictly commercial decision is reductive as it overlooks the literary gesture that an author makes when he chooses a genre. This might reflect, if we follow Bryce, a choice of subject matter as much as a choice of audience. Mukoma and other contemporary African writers embrace the popular deliberately, expressing a desire to be positioned askance to the literary proper, created in resistant dialogue with empire and metropolitan centers of cultural production, a dynamic from which they wish to move beyond. Pim Higginson has characterized Francophone genre fiction, for example, as the "frivolous literary" that irreverently shakes off the obligation to keep within certain bounds of propriety toward serious subjects and

3 Mukoma Wa Ngugi, "Searching for Clues in a Dangerous Nairobi." Interview on *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 13, 2013, www.npr.org/2013/07/13/200832498/searching-for-clues-in-a-dangerous-nairobi, accessed on February 13, 2017.

4 The improbable may not be a surprising feature of the crime novel, yet the extent of it in *Nairobi Heat* drew the attention of reviewers. See *Publishers Weekly*, May 30, 2011.

5 Karin Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," *African Studies Review* 30.3 (1987): 1–78, esp. 7.

6 Ibid., 9.

7 Jane Bryce, "Who No Know Go Know: Popular Fiction in Africa and the Caribbean," *The Oxford History of the Novel In English, Vol 11*: *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean since 1950*, ed. Simon Gikandi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 217–35, esp. 219.

8 Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–40, esp. 230. Hall only hesitantly endorses a class-bound notion of the popular as the cultural production of the working people because he is cautious about notions of cultural authenticity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aims instead at reading pleasure in the now, "writing without a purpose other than itself."[9] Behind this impulse lies an assertion of literary independence that demarcates the popular as that which toys with high-mindedness. To be an African writer doesn't mean that you write only socially engaged protest fiction or sincere Bildungsromanen. Thus we are warned of reading something serious into the thriller, a practice that is dismissed as an act of appropriation by the metropolitan reader who wishes to constrain the African writer. It would follow then that to ask the question about what to make of the Rwanda genocide as a background to a thriller is to read against the grain of "writing without a purpose other than itself." Mukoma, however, has explicitly invited readings of his work that focus on "societal issues."[10]

Furthermore, genre fiction, and in this case the thriller (or noir novel), is of course not without conventions. In fact, Tzvetan Todorov distinguished between high and popular literature by emphasizing the degree to which popular literature is bound to convention. High literature understands literary greatness as an overcoming of genre strictures. The great work of art breaks the mold and invents a new genre, whereas the successful genre fiction satisfies by giving perfect expression to a recognizable convention.[11] When Todorov's distinction is brought forward and applied to Higginson, it scales back the impression of unfettered expression in the "frivolous literary" and cautions us to pay attention to forces that shape the surrender to pleasure. The thriller offers an escape in violence and an abandonment of the disciplined structure of the detective novel, which culminates in a moment of perfect hindsight "where the narrator comprehends all past events."[12] Although *crime fiction* is the broader term that accommodates both the detective novel and the thriller, it behooves us here to stress the ways in which the two subgenres differ. The detective novel developed alongside empire and ingrained in its evolution as form is the notion of encounter "between nations, between races and cultures, and especially between imperial powers and its colonial territories."[13] The thriller eschews the exposure that such a sense of encounter elicits. Encounters may proliferate, but they pull us deeper into the muck of the noir milieu rather than being revelatory.

Less about characters and more about the "milieu represented," the thriller thus focuses on "sordid crime" and the "amorality of characters."[14] Todorov's careful delineation positions the thriller as the naturalist devolution of a more realist form (the detective novel) that pivots on a cause and effect reporting, which is an impoverished version of the full-blown engagement with historical action in the realist novel. In the case of Mukoma, the thriller and its naturalist milieu evoke the popular thrillers in African literature that reworked the aftermath of extended periods of

9 Pim Higginson, *The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the Francophone African Crime Novel* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press 2011), 27.

10 Mukoma, "Searching for Clues in a Dangerous Nairobi."

11 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1978), 43–44.

12 Ibid., 47.

13 Nels Pearson and Marc Singer, eds., "Open Cases: Detection, (Post)Modernity and the State," *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational Word* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 3.

14 Ibid., 48.

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conflict (the Mau Mau for Kenya in particular) into a complex body of war literature, which also exhibits strong naturalist logics.[15] What binds Mukoma's project to the literary is his recognition that there is a body of writing he can draw from that is already located interstitially between categories, in that endangered "residual" space in which the limit topic of violence in Africa can be untethered from the overdeterminations of the European imagination of a dark continent. It is not surprising that a key figure in his novels is a former combatant for the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The thriller in African literature sits in the unstable territory of the postconflict situation, carrying forward at least some of the naturalist logics of war fiction, a genre similarly addressed to a popular audience.[16]

The popular is often theorized as operating on a dual axis. For Hall, the duality is a dynamic of "containment and resistance."[17] Relegated to the outside, the popular is characterized by the impulse to break down barriers, to push back at efforts of containment. Speaking more specifically in terms of a literary popular, Todorov characterizes the typology of detective fiction similarly as operating along a double axis of two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, the past and the now. One of these stories comes to the fore and the other recedes to the background as we travel along the line that demarcates the detective novel from the thriller. In the thriller, the now takes over. Rwanda's location as a background to Mukoma's fiction is, however, unstable. We might fairly describe the works as set against the background of the genocide's aftermath, but this exposes a tension between past and present. Aftermath indicates that the past is still present and background presumes a certain familiarity that might be obfuscating instead of clarifying. The traumatic event from the past is thus carried forward to the novels' foreground, creating an ambivalence in the text signaled by a repeating vacillation between background and foreground.

The Rwanda genocide is an outsize historical event that does not fit comfortably as a background. To help us analyze this, we need to go beyond theories of the popular. Indeed, background and foreground generally are visual terms that recur in attempts to theorize how context creates meaning in the representation of historical events. Moreover, the problem of how to capture the relation between extreme circumstances and the ordinary is explored extensively in the analyses of representations of human suffering by scholars of human rights and literature. These three threads (the visual, human rights, and the literary) come together in Joseph Slaughter's discussion of the visual representation of suffering in Dutch Renaissance paintings. Slaughter usefully alerts us to a "vanishing point" in the visual field, the horizon that draws attention away from the violence depicted somewhere in the foreground.[18] Although out in the open, the atrocity depicted is hidden through the composition of the visual field, which directs our attention to some scene further afield, closer to the vanishing point. The juxtaposition on a canvas of distinct scenes of

15 Eleni Coundouriotis, *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 9–10.

16 Ibid., 17.

17 Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," 228.

18 Joseph R. Slaughter, "Vanishing Points: When Narrative Is Not Simply There," *Journal of Human Rights* 9 (2010): 207–23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

extreme suffering and ordinary life exposes an inequitable social order that sustains itself through the appearance of providing a (spurious) moral economy: for some to prosper, others must suffer.[19] Art conveys the seeming necessity of the juxtaposition, and hence coexistence, of atrocity and ordinary life, and expresses it visually by guiding our gaze to what sits far on the horizon away from the suffering situated nearby.

A similar reliance on a vanishing point in perspective resonates throughout Mukoma's fictional world where spheres of action and groups of people are placed contiguously without the effort yielding a total picture familiar to readers of realist texts. In Mukoma's case, it is ordinary life that is obscured as our attention is drawn to a vanishing point of high stakes action. Taking up Slaughter's caution about being drawn to what is revealed at the expense of what is concealed beyond the gesture of revelation, we can read Mukoma's thrillers for the way in which he refashions millennial African subjectivities using the pivotal event of the Rwanda genocide in revelatory ways. At the same time, we must also query what he pushes aside: the logics of the long aftermath of colonialism, which haunt the causal explanations of the genocide, and the roots of the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 that spurred the writing of *Black Star Nairobi*.[20] More specifically, revelation and concealment must be understood in their relation to narrative and, as Slaughter puts it, "unnarration." Turning his attention to a visual representation of the absence of narrative in the example of Jenny Holzer's "Redaction Series" (which depicts big blotches of blacked out text from the redacted torture memos of the George W. Bush administration), Slaughter argues that exposure can function unexpectedly as a blotting out, or what he calls an "unnarration."[21] "Unnarration" happens when exposure goes only so far as to delineate the borders around a secret, and the secret is revealed as that which we cannot narrate, although we presume there is a narrative hidden behind the blotch and beyond retrieval. Therefore, exposing the blotches as Holzer does by creating big canvases of the text's blackened image demonstrates not the absence of narrative so much as the violence of "unnarration." Thus we might ask, whether the popular's gesture of exposure can be thought of in relation to this problem of "unnarration," which brings attention to a violent history without delving into its details?

In what follows, the question of whether the novels attempt to illuminate the genocide or only evoke it as background shapes the approach to the popular. Furthermore, I argue that Mukoma's novels are also in conversation with the more canonical works of anticolonial "writing back" to empire and, in fact, perform an *unnarration*, or blotting out, of that discourse and the historical dynamics that inform it. Mukoma does not divorce himself entirely from this older literary project, which exercises a disruptive influence on the popular as he configures it. Finally, I situate the novels within the discussions that link literature to human rights by examining the relation among action, morality, and sentimentality to show how Mukoma reclaims and recasts the plot of intervention from the humanitarian framing of failed international intervention.

19 Ibid., 215.
20 Mukoma, "Searching for Clues in a Dangerous Nairobi."
21 Slaughter, "Vanishing Points," 210.

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Destablilizing Memory

If choosing to treat the Rwanda genocide in a thriller signals a break with seriousness, then the genre also opens the door to reimagining how the memory of the genocide is playing out. Part of the challenge in the reception of the novels is to figure out an appropriate reaction to a surprising recasting of key types. The treatment of Rwanda in the novels is built around two figures: Joshua Hakizimana, who is the prime suspect in the murder of a white girl with which *Nairobi Heat* begins, and Muddy, a female survivor of the genocide living as a refugee in Nairobi and known as a spoken word artist. These two figures are at first ambiguous, although by the end of the series they are returned to type: Joshua as perpetrator and Muddy as victim/survivor. Much of the text, all the same, is taken up with the blurring and unblurring of the distinction between hero and evil doer among the Rwandan refugee community in Kenya. For example, a women's survivors group accepts a bribe from an NGO to stay quiet about Joshua's false identity as a purported hero-savior in the genocide. His story exemplifies how consequential the blurring of identities can be. During the genocide, Joshua successfully presented himself as a Hutu willing to save Tutsi. He did so as a ruse to attract a large number of Tutsis to their death. His ruse continues to exert influence in the aftermath of the genocide and encourages collusion by the survivors: although the truth is known among the women's survivors group, Joshua maintains the public identity of a hero savior with their consent because it draws donations from the international community for the refugees. Thus the myth of the Hutu who saved Tutsi is a story the victim community is reluctant to give up because it has been lucrative, and the memory of the genocide is polluted.

This complicity, a form of codependency of the two communities undergirded by the international public's oversimplified understanding of the genocide, is one of the secrets that Mukoma's thriller exposes. When the lie is exposed, which amounts to a foregrounding of the genocide as an explanation for events in the present, it seems as if things will be set right by returning us to the truth. Yet exposure moves us in an entirely different direction. It launches the plot in a more surprising direction in *Black Star Nairobi*, which is concerned with a complex transnational conspiracy for world power. This plot extends our sense that the memory of the genocide has morphed into something evil. What we find is that international organizations are newly empowered in the aftermath of the genocide through a "never again" ethos that sustains their public image whereas behind the scenes they are instigating more instability to create a "clean slate" on which to build a new world order.[22] In the rapidly unfolding events in the foreground, the genocide recedes to the background once more, reemerging only at the end of the novel when it is evoked through Muddy's memory of her traumatic experience. By placing a conventional treatment of the memory of the genocide at the end of his extended narrative, Mukoma signals that the trauma remains and can generate material for another sequel.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Mukoma also tests the extent to which it is possible to redraw the figure of the victim/survivor. Muddy's history as a combatant for the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the force that brought an end to the

22 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 256.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

killings, complicates her more stereotyped casting as a victim of a gang rape who lost her family to genocidal violence. The events of the genocide that disrupted her education when she was a teen pushed her to join the RPF.[23] A fair amount of obfuscation, however, surrounds her actions during her time in the RPF, whereas repeated references are made to photographs that depict her as "a hardened soldier."[24] As an example of how the genocide is open to reinterpretation, these photos are used in *Black Star Nairobi* by those who intend to frame Muddy along with the other protagonists as terrorists. In one photo, the backdrop is a death camp and we learn that: "Out of context, the photograph made it seem like she was the one doing the killing."[25] Clearly, the reader is not meant to believe Muddy is guilty of atrocity. Instead, we are alerted to the dangerous decontextualization of images that can be instrumentalized to destabilize the memory of the genocide.

The reader, moreover, knows this photograph already because it had been alluded to in *Nairobi Heat*. It was purportedly taken after Muddy arrived with the liberators too late to save the victims. In *Nairobi Heat*, the photograph provides an occasion for Muddy to urge Ishmael, the African American detective who has come to Kenya to solve the murder of an unidentified white girl, not to categorize people into those who can kill and those who can't: "Never ask me if I have killed. You have no right.... The worst killers are the survivors... . Joshua can kill, but so can I or anyone else who has been through such a hell as we have."[26] If "the worst killers are the survivors," then Muddy contributes to the blurring of easy moral distinctions. Instead of focusing on how the photo seems to lie or give a false impression of her role, she instead strongly implies that she too has killed and censures Ishmael, warning him against using the act of killing as an absolute criterion to judge by. Such oblique references to her own actions and the explicit advice against prying questions about her past importantly perform a type of "unnarration," a blotting out of what happened occurring paradoxically as Muddy evokes the memory of those events.

In *Black Star Nairobi*, Muddy is drawn as a character that comes directly out of the thrillers associated with war fiction: a former combatant who returns to action. In the more militarized encounters of the second novel, Muddy becomes the group's strategist and commander, organizing the group in a guerrilla style operation: "She had taken charge. Muddy's military training, from her time in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, had kicked in, and it was a good thing, because neither O nor I had any training, much less in guerrilla warfare."[27] Muddy leads the action, transitioning smoothly from the combatant in war to a figure of rogue violence typical of the thriller. The portrayal of Muddy hardens even further as the violent plot of *Black Star Nairobi* unfolds and Ishmael reflects that he need never worry about her willingness to engage in a fight as: "part of her was addicted to the smell of gunpowder. I had never

23 The child soldier narrative has been analyzed as an interrupted novel of education, and this pattern fits Muddy's story. See Coundouriotis, *The People's Right to the Novel*, 222.

24 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 98.

25 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 75.

26 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 99. Ishmael is named after the narrator of *Moby Dick*, the only surviving member of the Pequod, which suggests that Mukoma is reworking Melville's theme of the hunt for evil. See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or the Whale* (New York: Signet, 2013).

27 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 127.

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known her to turn down a fight."[28] Being addicted to violence is a recognizable motif of war fiction in which the combatant turns increasingly into "war personified" in a moral degradation marked by the distortions of the experience of time in war, a temporality without a future or a beyond after the conflict.[29]

Whereas the popular licenses the representation of violence, in Mukoma it also sustains a sentimental attitude, exhibited primarily by Ishmael. Thus a young Rwandan refugee Ishmael saves from sexual assault, moves him to "the brink of tears."[30] Unable to get along with her peers at the Catholic nun's school where she has been given refuge, this refugee makes an emotional appeal to Ishmael to take her from the school. She is, however, interrupted by Muddy, who gives her pragmatic, unsentimental, "harsh" advice from one survivor to another.[31] Ishmael's empathic affect in the scene reminds the reader to never forget the victims of the genocide and cushions our impression of Muddy's toughness. Sentimentality surfaces again in a scene that similarly brings up the genocidal past: Ishmael cries when he participates in and witnesses Muddy's homecoming to Rwanda.[32] His empathic affect returns the novel repeatedly to the register of sincerity and sentimentality, reminding us of Mukoma's investment in "societal issues." What are we to make then of Ishmael and Muddy as a couple? Ultimately, Ishmael acts as a break on Muddy, as I show following, but he also moves toward a greater acceptance of the type of violence Muddy enacts. The thriller as genre refuses to locate itself realistically in relation to historical events, creating instead an impression of a false balance between the two tendencies as if they could correct each other and in the process provide some sort of resolution to the genocide's uncomfortable aftermath. Its more consequential intervention in the way we tell stories about the genocide is not retrospective but prospective, looking ahead to future actions.

Pushing Back Empire

Violent memories, however, are not limited to Rwanda. In Mukoma's postcolonial setting, there are dysfunctional vestiges of colonialism in play that hold a more personal meaning for him. Mukoma acknowledges that his own life was shaped under the shadow of his father's, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's, traumatic childhood during the Mau Mau war against colonialism in Kenya. Mukoma admits feeling disconnected from this history,[33] making his circumstance suggestive of the affective profile created by the "postmemory" characteristic of "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated."[34]

28 Ibid., 162.
29 Coundouriotis, *The People's Right to the Novel*, 27–28.
30 Ibid., 104.
31 Ibid., 105.
32 Ibid., 183.
33 Mukoma Wa Ngugi, "Beauty, Mourning, and Melancholy in Africa39," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/beauty-mourning-melancholy-africa39/, accessed on February 13, 2017.
34 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mukoma negotiates the malaise of "postmemory" by orchestrating a purge of colonial vestiges in *Nairobi Heat* that pushes his weighty literary inheritance into the background and along with it the shadow of his father's lived historical trauma of the war against British colonialism.

The key episode evoking colonial history centers on a white Kenyan, Lord Thompson, who "lives like an African" on his large estate that is his "kingdom." Here he is master but lives like a "native," regressing eccentrically to a premodern lifestyle.[35] Acquitted by the Kenyan courts for two murders, Thompson's impunity appears state-sanctioned. Yet he is summarily killed by David Odhiambo (or O), the Kenyan detective who is Ishmael's partner in Nairobi, after he threatens their lives. This episode functions to purge colonial associations lest Ishmael misreads contemporary Kenya as beholden to colonial dynamics. Reassuringly, Ishmael finds Lord Thompson repulsive: "I couldn't remember anyone eliciting so much anger and hatred from me in one meeting before."[36] Clear as this statement is, it functions as a veil over Thompson and the history he represents. It is another instance of "unnarration:" a destructive historical memory is evoked emotionally but not explained.

It is, however, hard to avoid the literary echoes that Mukoma creates with Lord Thompson. In Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*, the colonial official responsible for torturing detainees accused of being Mau Mau is also named Thompson.[37] This Thompson is responsible for an atrocity at a detention center that raises an outcry against colonial rule, precipitating the transition to independence. Mukoma re-creates the Thompson figure from his father's novel, reworking the thesis familiar to readers of Ngũgĩ, which holds that decolonization is a long unfinished project that continues after independence.[38] This redrawn Thompson, as we saw, is a settler and landowner who claims to be African. The political establishment is complicit with him in corruption. Together they represent precisely the corrosive elements that Odhiambo fights as a cop, now exposed as the state's continuation of vestiges from the past that have become blatantly criminal in the present. As the history of the colonial precedents for this situation gets pushed to the margins and obfuscated in the exoticism that Thompson cultivates, what comes to the foreground is the criminal, noir context that cannot accommodate a robust historical framing in its mode of in-the-now urgency. Lord Thompson is one of those people who, in the moral economy of Odhiambo's "outside world," can be summarily eliminated.[39] Indeed, Ishmael repeatedly remarks on Odhiambo's ability to dissociate or bifurcate the everyday, keeping his family life and affective bonds (his "inside world") from the noir world he navigates as a police detective (his "outside world").[40] Once eliminated, Thompson disappears from the novel's memory, purging along with him any references to colonialism.

35 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 56.

36 Ibid., 59.

37 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986).

38 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 1. Ngũgĩ has argued repeatedly in his essays that "imperialism is still the root cause of many problems in Africa."

39 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 72.

40 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Odhiambo and, later, Muddy play a crucial role in guiding Ishmael. He must rely on them to explain the present circumstances that define the field of action into which they have all been thrown. Because the dynamic operates along the logic of insider and outsider knowledge, Odhiambo and Muddy are held up as authentic informants. Authenticity functions as a type of foregrounding that can be problematic as it further entrenches conditions for the "unnarration" of the past. In the discussion of the visual dynamics of foregrounding that Slaughter develops, the trauma foregrounded by the black space of a redacted text shows us in visual terms the absence of narrative. More specifically it is an absence that marks the blotting out or "unnarration" of what had been there before. The figures of Odhiambo and Muddy call forth such blots of trauma that calibrate the relation between past and present.

Recasting the Criteria for Intervention

A strong thematic tie to the Rwandan genocide in the novels is the focus on the dilemmas over intervention. Despite occupying a dystopic world, Mukoma's characters struggle to understand what possibilities are left for ethical action. If the Rwanda genocide is remembered as an event in which the international community (represented primarily by the United Nations) failed spectacularly to intervene and stop the killing, the problem of intervention against evil in these novels is recast from the responsibility of state powers and international organizations to one of individuals who must seize the initiative away from such larger actors. With its emphasis on milieu, or the logic of environment, the thriller as genre connects setting to action, making it an ideal vehicle for rethinking what is possible in extreme circumstances.

Evil is generalized in the novels, but the response to it is particular, coming from Ishmael, Odhiambo, and Muddy. Mukoma's recurring theme is a deep sense of personal grievance and the need to find justice, usually by means of extra-judicial killings. As an American police officer, Ishmael is portrayed as hesitant to rationalize such actions. Frequently cast as an observer of his Kenyan counterpart, Ishmael struggles to understand what he calls Odhiambo's "duality," the ability to compartmentalize his life as discussed previously. Odhiambo teaches Ishmael the efficacy of killing those who stand in his way and the necessity to make snap judgments about who is on the side of right and who is not. Moreover, Odhiambo owns his actions, and his candor has appeal, although it licenses his impunity: "Ishmael," he tells his partner, "we are bad people too… . The only difference is that we fight on the side of the good. I hope you have no illusions about that."[41] Ishmael starts out with a different code: he sees himself as the guardian of the anonymous, ordinary civilian who is assumed to be innocent and in need of protection. But in the thriller milieu, the imperative changes: to seize the initiative away from larger, more powerful actors, the protagonist is reoriented toward more autonomous decision making.

Mukoma's thrillers, thus, experiment with the limits of criteria for violent intervention. As an author, he betrays his interest in "societal issues" by staging debates on the morality of action for which he uses his American protagonist as a sounding board. From Odhiambo's perspective, the types of ordinary people Ishmael

41 Ibid., 73–74.

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sees as his duty to protect do not come easily into focus. Odhiambo fights only for those who have proven to him that they stand on the side of good. As noted earlier, in Mukoma's fictional world, ordinary people are cast in the shadow, rendered invisible as the reader focuses on the vanishing point of the ever-unfolding adventure of the thriller. The moral order of foreground and vanishing point or horizon is inverted from what Slaughter identified. The foreground hides the suffering of ordinary life, not of extraordinary violence or torture, whereas the vanishing point does not suggest a soothing orderliness of things but the normalcy of the time-space of the thriller that promises to extend out with an infinitely renewable sameness. Those individuals that come into focus as worthy of action for Odhiambo are persons who must have had to make choices and hence risked something of themselves. They are figures that stand out, such as Odhiambo's wife, Mary, and the white girl killed in Madison, figures who are displaced by events from their ordinary life onto the stream of action of the thriller.[42] Both of these women gain visibility by making risky, principled choices: Mary marries across ethnic lines and devotes herself to being a teacher, and the girl courageously sought out the killer of her parents. For Odhiambo, these are women on whose behalf it is worth intervening, but we can't ignore the irony that the urgency to act on their behalf emerges after they have been killed. Intervention shades into vengeance.

The code that licenses Odhiambo to act autonomously displays the logic of state collapse that borders "dissolution," as the term has been applied to Somalia in the 1990s,[43] an analogy made in the novel.[44] When the politics of Kenya threaten to devolve into civil conflict, the boundary between the violence to be expected in a noir genre and real political violence blurs. The postelection violence of 2007 is portrayed in *Black Star Nairobi* as foreground, a reality that has actually interrupted the thriller. Odhiambo stands against ethnic politics and recognizes that the political corruption he fights feeds off the divides that lead to ethnic killing. This is the "society just about to explode" that Mukoma refers to as representing the type of extreme circumstances that the thriller enables him to explore.[45]

The Nairobi slum Mathare becomes a testing ground for Odhiambo and Ishmael's different styles of policing and divergent orientations toward the suffering of ordinary people. After their investigation leads them to a dead end and as they are about to leave the slum, Ishmael hears cries of distress and responds spontaneously. Our attention is drawn to the foreground of the ordinary, which now explodes in violence. Ishmael's intervention brings on unintended consequences as it escalates dramatically, resulting in the death of three men, one of whom is executed point-blank by Odhiambo.[46] Ishmael's "fear, shock, and disgust" (he vomits at the scene of the killing) demarcate him as an outsider.[47] A contrasting circumstance unfolds when the setting

42 Women are treated as the cliché sacrificial figures who shore up the sense of justice that drives men. See Elleke Boehmer, "Motherlands, Mothers, and Nationalist Sons: Representations of Nationalism and Women in African Literature," *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Sydney, Australia: Dangaroo, 1992), 232.

43 Simons, Anna. *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), 39.

44 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 250.

45 Mukoma, "Searching for Clues in a Dangerous Nairobi."

46 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 41. "He started to say something, making pleading gestures, but O shot him twice—once in the heart and once in the head."

47 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

changes to the Americas in *Black Star Nairobi* and Ishmael's code of policing gains over his African counterparts. Faced with the prospect of being accomplices in the killing of an undercover police officer, Ishmael restrains his partners and prevents this from happening even though his decision is inconvenient and risky, possibly derailing their progress toward solving their case.[48] The two codes that shape different decisions about intervention correlate with the two distinct geographies of action, but also create different visual fields for mapping the foreground and vanishing point.

Mukoma explores further the parameters of intervention by focusing on the role of NGOs and institutions of international governance in *Nairobi Heat*. Those involved in running NGOs (partnerships of white Americans and Africans—Kenyans and Rwandans) are portrayed as corrupt exploiters of the world's bad conscience over nonintervention in the genocide. Furthermore, the influence of shadowy transnational organizations runs amok in *Black Star Nairobi* where Mukoma's target is the nation-building and democratization agenda of the first world. After adventures in Mexico and the United States, the novel returns the protagonists to Kenya where they must foil the plot for world domination by an organization they discovered in the United States: the IDESC, or "International Democracy and Economic Security Council," a coalition of technocrats from international organizations working off the books.[49]

The language comparing ordinary and extraordinary, less and more autonomous, actors is mobilized once more in the novel's final denouement, bringing into sharper focus the issue of who has the authority to act on behalf of others. The IDESC is made up of the ordinary members of international organizations, the anonymous bureaucrats, who Mukoma implies are not mere instruments of the leadership of such organizations but the actual—cultural, ideological, and political—force sustaining the world governance structure that legitimates these organizations' authority. The members of IDESC represent "the figure of the unnamed man in the background … the managers, the assistant directors, the press secretaries" who, in the words of one member of the group, have "discovered that we wielded the real power."[50] IDESC's plot is to transform the world by instigating political change in countries facing crises of governance. It foments civil conflict through campaigns of terror and, in the political vacuum that ensues ("call it a clean slate"), expects to plant its own men.[51] The hubris of instigating short-term disruption with the presumption that it will bring forth long-term stability is, of course, the wrong type of intervention. The IDESC expects to create a new, more just world society despite the violence that it unleashes first through its disruptive actions. This conspiracy scenario masks Mukoma's more serious critique of international organizations that rationalize their violent world order–building ambitions. By comparison to such intervention, the autonomous actions of Odhiambo, Muddy, and Ishmael appear salubrious.

It is not difficult to detect in the depiction of the IDESC an almost parodic treatment of the first world's nation-building and democratization agenda. As Ishmael assimilates what he is learning, he understands Odhiambo's insight that the group

48 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 167.
49 Ibid., 215.
50 Ibid., 229–30.
51 Ibid., 256.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"weren't mercenaries; they weren't in it for the money or the glory—for the power, yes, but without personal gain." Odhiambo thus characterizes them as "Jesus on steroids."[52] Mukoma's political commentary becomes more explicit when Sahara (the organization's leader) tries to recruit them by alluding to Barack Obama's campaign speech on Super Tuesday, February 5, 2008. Sahara uses the speech's much quoted refrain ("we are the ones we have been waiting for"[53]) and highlights the ironies of his self-centered logic:

> [i]f I had cancer, I would be asking why me and not someone else. Well, damn it, why not me? Why not me to bring in the new day? Why not you? Or O? Or Ishmael? Why not all of us? … I am not a megalomaniac, or a savior. *I just happen to have taken responsibility for the world I live in*. My conscience is clean. Can you say the same?[54]

Because Sahara is also the killer of Odhiambo's wife, this statement is particularly galling. Its moral compass turns on the word *responsibility*, yet Sahara is unable to grasp the harm he has done, harm that is very personal and particular to the man he is trying to recruit to his cause of "taking responsibility for the world" he lives in.

The responsibility Sahara claims to have taken excludes personal responsibility for killing an innocent woman and for myriad other individualized, particularized lives that his actions have snuffed. If we read "responsibility" through the critique implied in Mukoma's irony, responsibility expresses an entitlement to decide the fate of large swaths of humanity and to see things as "me" and "mine." Whether this is a fair interpretation of Obama's speech and politics matters less than the yawning gap it opens up between intended and actual impact, a problem that characterizes American hubris in the post–cold war era. Taking responsibility, in Sahara's phrasing, is not a retrospective action at all. It is solely prospective: a declaration of intent to license one's own violence. Hence it differs from Odhiambo's admission that "we are bad people too."

The ambition to lead the world into a new era after engineering a "clean slate" is seductive. Mukoma's three protagonists reach a point where, having killed Sahara in an action necessary to restore their personal sense of justice, they debate whether they should take over this effort to create a "clean slate." Ishmael recognizes their magical thinking, however: "We had gone insane and entered a universe of calculation and logic."[55] Muddy is most susceptible to the allure of this politics. She argues in favor of detonating the bomb that would kill all the politicians in Kenya who have gathered for a reconciliation meeting after the 2007 violence: "Let them all die … this country will be better off without them. In Rwanda, I would have killed for an opportunity like this —we could have ended it all. Let them all die." This is a rare moment of retrospection in Mukoma's text when the past is alluded to not as a trauma but as a historical sphere of action where right and wrong decisions about how to act are made. When challenged by Ishmael who asks "What if we're wrong?" she gives a chilling reply: "Then one million people die, like in Rwanda."[56]

52 Ibid., 256.
53 Ibid., 257.
54 Ibid., emphasis added.
55 Ibid., 258.
56 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The allusion to Rwanda lends this scene the weight of immense consequence. Presented with the opportunity to step into Sahara and the IDESC's role, the minor players Odhiambo, Muddy, and Ishmael are poised to be immensely consequential. Yet there is a different way to read this, taking up the invitation to retrospection offered by Muddy. Isn't every historical action haunted by the limitless potential of its unintended consequences? In this exchange, the novel lays bare its suspicions about the political motivations that shaped the momentous events of the Rwanda genocide. It might be improper to read *Nairobi Heat* and *Black Star Nairobi* as a continuous text, reading back from the sequel into the representation of the genocide in the first novel. And it might even be more problematic to do so in order to argue that there is a serious political view in the thrillers. Yet, the unfolding logic of Mukoma's thrillers seems to unfetter a political suspicion that haunts the continent. When Muddy, who is closely identified with the RPF and its heroic narrative, says "I would have killed for an opportunity like this," suddenly the irony of a literal meaning comes through. What if the RPF made precisely that gamble and lost, indirectly causing the death of 1 million people? It seems as if Mukoma's most cautionary moment is to air (indirectly to be sure) the allegation that the RPF downed President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane, setting in motion the genocide. In *Black Star Nairobi*, the allusions to Rwanda lend a feeling of realism to a conspiracy plot that extends into the genocide's aftermath. Confronted with these new possibilities, Muddy contemplates an action that makes sense to her because of her experience of the genocide, and seems to revive some of the logic of the earlier time. Ishmael, who had previously cautioned against the dangers of state "dissolution" and mass violence, wavers and initially accedes to Muddy's logic: "Let's do it," he answers.[57]

How to foil such a grand scheme whose seductiveness is its promise to disrupt in the short term but end all violence thereafter becomes the urgent problem. Personal imperatives are successfully foregrounded and mobilized to prevent this false turn. Odhiambo's urgent need to get revenge and a sense of personal justice for the killing of his wife brings Ishmael back from this precipice. After killing Sahara and having gotten revenge for his wife's murder, however, Odhiambo wavers, considering whether this moment offers an opportunity to make even more out of her death. He decides instead that, acting in her memory, he cannot bring about more violence. Odhiambo comments wryly: "so this is what power feels like," but does not want to become Sahara's instrument. According to the logic of "Jesus on steroids," Sahara's death would become a form of martyrdom for the cause and "he wins."[58]

Despite what appears like unfettered violence, Mukoma's thrillers put forth, surprisingly, the idea of restraint. Instead of acting on behalf of an organization or a state, what matters is the "I" that remains loyal to the immediate, affective ties that connect us to particular persons in our lives. Through the example of how Odhiambo navigates a violent world, Ishmael delimits his sphere of action: "I just wanted to see justice for Amos and Mary. All this other shit was beyond me—I could live with that … for now, we had done our little bit."[59] Although the IDESC will probably

57 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 259.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"reconstitute itself," all Ishmael wants responsibility for is his "little bit,"[60] and he refuses the preemptive logic of the "clean slate."

Conclusion

As alluded to earlier, *Black Star Nairobi* ends with Muddy's stage performance and Ishmael's reflections. In this final scene, Muddy is accompanied by instruments and other voices. Ishmael hears in the music a repeating cycle of building and destroying as well as the searching question "why"?[61] Muddy is the reference point in the novel for the suffering caused by the genocide, and the novel's "why" posits the futility of mass killing. But as a question left unanswered and unanswerable, it also addresses the logic of genre. The thriller assumes a loosely analogous orientation toward repetition. It compulsively renews violent plots, driving forever onward in an unending similarity. "Prospection," Todorov tells us, "takes the place of retrospection."[62] By asserting his protagonists' defensive posture and rendering them reactive to circumstances, Mukoma foregrounds the defining role of the "milieu," the logic of environment created "around specific characters and behavior."[63] Nairobi is highlighted in the title of both novels, and it is this insistent location of the origin of the action in Nairobi that suggests the works' affinities with an African popular.[64] For millennial fiction, it is not colonialism as much as a humanitarian logic of victims and saviors that needs to be resisted. The term *responsibility* is reclaimed from the language of international politics and a transnational elite whose ambition is to remake the world and "save" humanity for the personal commitments that tie individuals to those in their immediate circle and community, debunking humanitarian logics that do not acknowledge the extent of their own violent means.

The novels' use of the Rwanda genocide and its aftermath as a background stitches together the local, the transnational, and the global. Something of this event's outsize dimensions elicits from the thriller a compensatory realm of action where "anarchy" can be staved off in just those moments when *justice can be seen*. As Odhiambo explains: "after that I started believing in justice I could see. We live in anarchy; life is cheap and the rich and the criminals can buy a whole lot of it. Meantime someone has to be on the side of justice."[65] When Odhiambo justifies himself with a statement such as "Meantime someone has to be on the side of justice," he alerts us explicitly to the temporal order of storytelling and its narrative space in excess to reality. The "meantime" of a story-world foregrounds his own consequentiality in relation to the state that has abandoned him. What's blotted out or unnarrated is precisely how this abandonment has unfolded. To flesh out this story, the long aftermath of colonialism

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 267.

62 Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 47.

63 Ibid., 48.

64 Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (London: McFarland, 2012), 11. Knight has correlated innovation in crime genres to the historical emergence of urban centers. Although his scholarship is historical, Nairobi's millennial emergence as an economic powerhouse undergirds the new feel of Mukoma's fiction in an analogous fashion.

65 Ngugi, *Nairobi Heat*, 67.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would have to be evoked anew. Thus one of the functions of the thriller as genre is possibly to elicit a desire to reengage with a more historically attuned realism.

Rwanda ultimately is less the background for Mukoma's thrillers than a foreground analogous to the dark blots of a redacted text that display the unnarration of the past. Evoking the genocide creates a deep impression of acting in its aftermath without grounding the event itself in a historical account. Action in the present, and hence the emphasis on plot, are of paramount interest. Pivoting on "prospection," Mukoma's novels provoke us to think about the parameters of action for individuals, and expose as self-serving and dubious the ambition to "tak[e] responsibility *for the world* [we] live in."[66] Distrust of international institutions is understandable given how Mukoma characterizes them. The genocide exposed the danger of inaction and nonresponse, but did it also demonstrate that in the compensatory reactiveness that followed, the conditions were ripe for a cynical exploitation of the dispensation given to international institutions? Whereas we cannot read the thrillers for realism, it is possible to acknowledge how they unsettle our conventional views.

66 Ngugi, *Black Star Nairobi*, 257 (emphasis added).

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